

## **Words that Tear the Flesh**

# **Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture**



Edited by  
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

## **Volume 21**

# Words that Tear the Flesh

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Essays on Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern  
Literature and Cultures

Edited by  
Alan Baragona and Elizabeth L. Rambo

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## Acknowledgements and Dedications

In good 21<sup>st</sup>-century fashion, this book came to be, in part, thanks to social media. In the Spring of 2014, Alan Baragona, in semi-retirement, was invited to teach a survey of medieval European literature at James Madison University. He decided to include on the syllabus some of the stories of Cú Chulaind, which he had never taught in a class before. Rereading “The Death of Aífe’s Only Son,” he noticed a clear pattern of sarcasm. At seven years old, the son of Aífe and Cú Chulaind challenges the heroes of Emain Macha to combat. After he defeats the first one, two successive warriors begin their challenge by saying, in Jeffrey Gantz’s translation, “Delightful your games, little boy.”<sup>1</sup> Here was an instance where circumstance and wording combine to give a clear signal of a sarcastic speaker. On reflection, most of the other instances he could think of were in Irish or Welsh literature, so he turned to the hive mind of Facebook, specifically the Facebook page of the Southeastern Medieval Association. He gave his example, asked for others, and wisecracked that he wondered whether the Celts had “cornered the snarket” on sarcasm. Examples came pouring in from SEMA members, citing works in almost every medieval European language and genre. Larissa Tracy of Longwood University suggested he collect an anthology on the topic. His longtime friend from graduate school, Elizabeth Rambo of Campbell University, volunteered to co-edit it, and Melissa Ridley Elmes of Lindenwood University suggested the working title, *Cornering the Snarket*. The Call for Papers garnered even more examples from an even broader range of cultures, and the editors still think of their contributors as “The Snarketeers.”

We would like to give special thanks to Larissa Tracy for encouraging the project and to John Skuce of Campbell University Computing Services, who helped compile this volume from files that did not always get along. Elizabeth Rambo dedicates this book to her father, who brought his children up to appreciate sarcastic humor on the page. Alan Baragona dedicates it to his wife, Kathy, and daughter, Laura, who are both masters of the flesh tearing technique but use it delicately.

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1 “The Death of Aífe’s Only Son,” *Early Irish Myths and Sagas*, trans. Jeffrey Gantz, London: Penguin Books, 1981, 150 – 151.



# Table of Contents

Alan Baragona and Elizabeth L. Rambo

**Introduction — 1**

Rick McDonald

**Encountering Snarks in Anglo-Saxon Translation**

One Translator's Top 10 List — 21

Christopher Abram

**Trolling in Old Norse**

Ambiguity and Incitement in *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* — 41

Máire Johnson

**Snark and the Saint**

The Art of the Irish Curse — 63

Jeremy Farrell

**Comic Authority**

Sarcasm in Pre-modern Arabic Literature — 85

Nicolino Applauso

**Sarcasm and its Consequences in Diplomacy and Politics in Medieval Italy**

Brunetto Latini's Letter to Pavia and Dante's *Monarchia* — 119

Debra E. Best

**"A lowed laghtur that lady logh"**

Laughter, Snark, and Sarcasm in Middle English Romance — 143

Brian S. Lee

**"*Hostilis Inrisio*"**

Some Instances of "derision with a certain severity" in Medieval English Literature — 165

Esther Bernstein

**Self-Evident Morals?**

Affective Reversal as Social Critique in Henryson's Fables — 185

Patricia Sokolski

**Let's Not Get Snarky about Derision!**

Fabliau Husbands and Wives in Conversation — 205

Ellen Lorraine Friedrich

**Poking [Fun] at [the Foibles of] the Flesh**

The Galician-Portuguese cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer — 225

Albrecht Classen

**Sarcasm in Medieval German and Old Norse Literature**

From the *Hildebrandslied* to *Fortunatus*: The Dark Side of Human Behavior — 249

Elza C. Tiner

**Sarcasm and Heresy**

John Wyclif and the York *Fall of the Angels* Play — 271

Scott O'Neil

**Lorenzo Valla's "Intellectual Violence"**

Personal Feuds and Appropriated Sarcasm — 291

Joe Ricke

**Snarky Shrews**

Gender Comedy and the Uses of Sarcasm — 311

**Bibliography — 337**

**Contributors' Biographies — 369**

**Index of Names — 371**

**Index of Subjects — 373**



Alan Baragona and Elizabeth L. Rambo

# Introduction

## The Problem of Sarcasm

In 1979, the sketch comedy show *Saturday Night Live* did a parody of a late night talk show. It featured the host, a writer, and an actor who was about to appear in the movie of the writer's book. The host announces "I'm your host, Joan Face. As you may know, this is our last show tonight, but we put together a really fascinating program. I'm sure you'll love it. My first guest is a great, great writer, Nigel Quist, who I know you're all big fans of, as who wouldn't be?" The writer responds "Thank you, Joan. Being on your show is a real thrill for me! It's certainly a must for any author promoting a book." Later, the actor, Greg, says "Working with Nigel has been so great. He's a real genius," to which Nigel replies, "Yeah, Greg's performance is absolutely amazing! A real Oscar winner."<sup>1</sup> The entire interview goes this way, and if all one had were the transcript, it would appear to be an ordinary, vacuous Hollywood love-fest. As such, it satirizes the emptiness of these affairs, but without being funny.

However, the sketch actually opens with a logo of the fake show's title, "Heavy Sarcasm," the three characters are sitting under a large sign with the title, and the host actually begins with "Good evening, and welcome to 'Heavy Sarcasm.'" The apparent flattery is laced with eye rolls, smirks, sidelong glances, and a sarcastic tone marked by unnatural emphasis, drawn out vowels, and roller coaster fluctuations in pitch. The satire of Hollywood hypocrisy comes in the delivery rather than the script, in vocal tone, facial expression, and body language that reveal the character's true feelings, all first signaled and driven home by the show's title. The "Heavy Sarcasm" title, in fact, is not necessary for the audience to get the point, but it telegraphs what is coming and makes it all funnier, because, unlike the usual bland title of talk shows, it is the one, straightforward true statement in the whole sketch.

In addition to hitting the mark of its satire, the skit illustrates four important things about the nature of sarcasm as usually conceived in the modern age. First, sarcasm requires that "the speaker is overtly meaning (and saying) the opposite

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<sup>1</sup> "Saturday Night Live Transcripts," accessed January 4, 2015, <http://snltranscripts.jt.org/79/79bsarcasm.phtml>.

of what he or she ostensibly claims to be saying.”<sup>2</sup> Thus, a sarcastic utterance has a surface meaning, an opposite underlying meaning, and conveys a “meta-message” that the surface meaning should not be taken literally.<sup>3</sup> As such, it can be considered a species of irony. Quintilian argued that with *ironia* itself the hearer knows that “the opposite of what is said must be understood,”<sup>4</sup> but linguists like Margaret Sinex and Elisabeth Camp have argued that “oppositeness” is not a trait of all types of rhetorical figures that are regularly considered species of irony, such as litotes,<sup>5</sup> and limit that quality to sarcasm. Stephen Gordon clarifies the distinction, writing that “while irony is relativistic—that is, the meaning of the text is *something other* than its literal form—sarcasm can be seen as a direct exhortation by the speaker/writer to the audience, where the meaning of a phrase is *opposite* to what has been stated. In other words, the unsaid ‘meta-messages’ of an ironic statement are multiple and subjective; sarcastic utterances, by contrast, are singular and absolute.”<sup>6</sup> As we shall see, this is a consensus opinion, but not a universal one.

Second, the true meaning must be derisive. Greek *sarkasmos*, after all, comes from *sarkasein* “to tear flesh.”<sup>7</sup> Donald Muecke, in his 1969 *The Compass of Irony*, calls sarcasm “the crudest form of irony,’ functioning as a way of overtly ridiculing the object of the sarcastic statement.”<sup>8</sup> John Haiman says “the humor in sarcasm (as in irony) lies in the contrast between the speaker’s flattering or sympathetic words (his or her ostensible message...) and his or her hostile intentions.”<sup>9</sup> He specifically connects it to mockery, as does Konrad Werkhofer,<sup>10</sup> but goes further and asserts that “[w]hat is essential to sarcasm is that it is overt irony intentionally used by the speaker as a form of verbal aggression.”<sup>11</sup>

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2 John Haiman, *Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, 9–10.

3 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 12, 16, and 21.

4 Margaret Sinex, “Echoic Irony in Walter Map’s Satire against the Cistercians,” *Comparative Literature* 54 (2002): 277.

5 Sinex, “Echoic Irony,” 278; Elisabeth Camp, “Sarcasm, Pretense, and The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction,” *Nous* 46.4 (2012): 587.

6 Stephen Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective in the *Nugae* of Walter Map,” *JEGP* 116.1 (January 2017): 85.

7 “sarcasm, n.” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 1 November 2014.

8 Quoted in Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective,” 85.

9 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 21.

10 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 21; and Konrad T. Werkhofer, “Traditional and Modern Views: The Social Constitution and the Power of Politeness,” in *Politeness in Language: Studies in History, Theory and Practice*, Second Edition, ed. Richard J. Watts et al. (Berlin, New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 2005), 192.

11 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 20.

Third, in verbal discourse, both the ironic meaning and the derision depend primarily on “incongruity between segmental and suprasegmental” aspects of the utterance, in other words, between the words and their delivery, such as exaggerated, often hyper-formal tone, eye-rolling, sneers, or other facial expressions.<sup>12</sup> These “extra-textual” features of language make it difficult to pick out sarcasm from reading the text alone without explicit written instruction, such as stage directions or an explicit narrative cue.

Finally, some elements of context, in this case the show title, can hint at or reinforce the perception that sarcasm is at work, though it is not absolutely necessary, what linguists sometimes call “framing” in discourse analysis and pragmatics, including “politeness studies” and “impoliteness studies.”<sup>13</sup> This is, naturally, especially important to reading, rather than hearing, a potentially sarcastic remark. As Graham Williams notes, “[W]e have much less, if any, access to extra-linguistic cues when dealing solely with textual language. As opposed to speech, where it is more often possible to compare what is being said, literally, with how it is said (through intonation, body language, etc.), written irony, and specifically sarcasm, works by juxtaposing what is said in one part of a ‘linear string’ and what is said elsewhere.”<sup>14</sup> “What is said elsewhere” can include what is written elsewhere in the same work and what is written elsewhere in related or analogous works, as well as taking into account larger social and cultural contexts.

Medieval rhetoricians were keenly aware of these subtleties, although it was not always thought to be so. As late as 1979, one scholar, K.S. Campbell, asserted that “there was ‘a singular lack of theoretical interest in allegory and irony’” in

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<sup>12</sup> John Haiman, “Sarcasm as Theater,” *Cognitive Linguistics* 1.2 (1990): 181 and *passim*; see also, Rebecca Clift, “Irony in Conversation,” *Language in Society* 28.4 (Dec., 1999): 545–46; and Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective,” 86.

<sup>13</sup> See Shoshana Blum-Kulka, “The Metapragmatics of Politeness in Israeli Society,” in Watts, *Politeness in Language*, 264; Clift, “Irony in Conversation,” *passim*; Suzanne Fleischman, “Philology, Linguistics, and the Discourse of the Medieval Text,” *Speculum* 65.1 (1990): 28ff.; Marta Dynel, “The Landscape of Impoliteness Research,” *Journal of Politeness Research* 11.2 (2015): 340ff.; Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective,” 95; Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 12–13 and *passim*; David S. Kaufer, “The Functions of Sarcastic Irony in Speech,” *Journal of Pragmatics* 26 (1996): 614–615; Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Dialogue and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), *passim*; and Graham Williams, “‘troubled with a tedious discours’: Sincerity, Sarcasm, and Seriousness in the Letters of Maria Thynne, c. 1601–1610,” *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 11.2 (2010): 169.

<sup>14</sup> Williams, “‘troubled with a tedious discours,’” 171.

the Middle Ages.<sup>15</sup> In his *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, which includes the only extensive treatment of sarcasm in medieval and Renaissance literature, Dilwyn Knox points out that even discussions of medieval understanding of irony used to be limited to a few “classical and late classical definitions, including those in Cicero’s *De oratore* and Quintilian’s *Institutiones oratoriae*” and “a handful of medieval ones.”<sup>16</sup> However, Knox believes a full picture of the medieval understanding of irony and related tropes requires study of a wide variety of medieval writers, including the Venerable Bede, Aelius Donatus, Isidore of Seville, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf, in addition to less well known writers such as Julian of Toledo, Boncompagno da Signa, Alexander de Villa Dei, Eberhardus Bethuniensis, Petrus Lombardus, and pseudo-Aristotle.<sup>17</sup>

The same can be said of sarcasm. In fact, Knox himself writes that *sarcasmos* is “of little importance” before the fifteenth century except in theoretical discussions,<sup>18</sup> a contention that this volume seriously calls into question. Perhaps it is because sarcasm relies so much on non-verbal signals. Medieval commentators were well aware that, in oratory, facial expression, gesture, and/or tone are meant to make clear the intended meaning that the verbal expression alone might hide. They recommended the use of such non-verbal signals to convey intended meaning instead of purely literal statement for its expressive value, affecting “the emotional tenor of a sentence.”<sup>19</sup> On parchment, however, without facial expressions and gesture, tone that works by indirection, such as sarcasm, becomes harder to pick out or pin down. In fact, there is some evidence of medieval readers missing the point. Stephen Gordon gives reasons to believe that the irony in Walter Map’s *Nugae* might have been “too subtle for his readership to decipher.”<sup>20</sup>

That most subtle of writers, Chaucer, is a prime example of the challenge modern readers face deciphering sarcasm in medieval literature where the framing context can be even more difficult to reconstruct than it was for his contemporaries. We know that the poet-Chaucer employs irony when he calls the Friar a “worthy limitour.” The general context of antifraternel satire and the specific content of the portrait make it impossible to believe that any fourteenth-century author or reader would really believe the Friar is worthy. But what of the narra-

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15 Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, vol. 16 (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 2n.

16 Knox, *Ironia*, 2.

17 Knox, *Ironia*, 2 and *passim*.

18 Knox, *Ironia*, 153–154.

19 Knox, *Ironia*, 78.

20 Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective,” 88.

tor, the pilgrim-Chaucer? For over a century in Chaucer scholarship, it has been assumed that the speaker “Geoffrey” is either naïve enough or obsequious enough to mean everything he says about the other pilgrims, including fawning flattery of the Monk, Friar, Merchant, Physician, and others. If this is the case, the pilgrim-Chaucer is an indirect and ironic vehicle for the poet-Chaucer’s satire. His naïveté complicates our reading of figures like the Knight, Squire, and Clerk, who may very well be just as worthy as the narrator says, but, under the circumstance of his skewed perceptions, might not.

However, the same narrator openly excoriates the Summoner and the Pardoner, obvious scoundrels, so he is not wholly naïve. And what are we to make of his view of the pirate Shipman? Can he really mean it when he calls him “a good felawe” (l. 395)<sup>21</sup> and then a few lines later tells us that he murders prisoners by making them walk the plank?

Of nyce conscience took he no keep.  
If that he faught and hadde the hyer hond,  
By water he sente hem hoom to every lond. (ll. 398–400)

It is not out of the realm of possibility that a naïve narrator might romanticize a pirate, as has been done throughout history, but it is hard to accept that even the most naïve speaker would so openly praise murder, so it seems likely that “good felawe” is an instance of sarcasm. It is thus perfectly possible that, when “Geoffrey” compliments the Friar or Monk, we are also meant to imagine a tone of heavy sarcasm, which would make him a direct mouthpiece for the poet’s low opinion, and the distinction between the poet and the narrator would break down, changing the view of Chaucer’s ironic method. Unfortunately, it also means that, as in the Saturday Night Live sketch, the sarcastic tone could just as easily be applied to the Knight and even the Parson. Even more unfortunately, while this sort of sarcasm is less subtle than other forms of irony, it is much harder to pick out of a text. There is no definitive way to explain why the poet-Chaucer would have his alter-ego, “Geoffrey,” openly excoriate the Pardoner, use sarcasm for the Shipman, and be more subtly ironic with the Friar. In the case of the pilgrim-Chaucer, there is simply no way to tell.

There are, however, medieval and early modern texts in which the combination of circumstance and word choice make clear that the speaker, whether a character or a narrator, is being sarcastic. The essays in this volume identify and analyze instances of such unambiguous sarcasm in a broad range of

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<sup>21</sup> All quotations from Chaucer are from *The Riverside Chaucer*, Third Edition. Larry Benson, gen. ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008).

works. Essays address questions such as what clues the writers provide that sarcasm is at work, how it conforms to or deviates from medieval rhetorical theory, whether it shows up mostly in the mouths of characters or of narrators, what role it plays in building character or theme, the differences between sarcastic language and sarcastic action, how prominently sarcasm appears in particular cultures or specific genres, and how sarcasm fits into the Christian milieu of medieval Europe and the Islamic culture of medieval Arabia.

## Sarcasm through (Rolling) Medieval Eyes

The usual modern view of sarcasm, as illustrated above, is that it is a subtype of irony, because the speaker means the opposite of what is said. Unlike other forms of irony, sarcasm is supposed to have a hurtful intent, usually “blame by praise,” and the blame is signaled by tone of voice and perhaps facial expression and gesture. However, medieval treatises on rhetoric are much more varied in their discussion of both irony and sarcasm. The imprecision is understandable because of the nature of the terms. Jorg Rawel has said, “In common linguistic usage, there is barely a difference between irony and sarcasm. Often the impossibility to distinguish subcategories of humorous phenomena are even described as one the characteristics of humor itself.”<sup>22</sup> The variety of false etymologies alone for both *ironia* and *sarcasmos* or *sarcasmus* among rhetoricians, the medieval equivalent of linguists, illustrate how differently individual writers might understand their nature. Most importantly, it can be unclear whether any given literary author is working with a particular conception of sarcasm, or even the term itself, in mind.

Knox’s *Ironia* serves as a basis for the discussion of the history of the trope, along with primary texts of writers such as Donatus, Bede, Isidore, and Geoffrey of Vinsauf. The grammarian Donatus is a foundational text for later writers, especially Bede, who quotes his definitions and categorizations almost verbatim.<sup>23</sup> Unlike what we characterize as the common modern view, however, Donatus does not classify sarcasm as a species of irony; rather, he classifies both as subtypes of allegory.<sup>24</sup> Allegory is saying one thing and meaning another. Irony more

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<sup>22</sup> Jorg Rawel, “The Relationship between Irony, Sarcasm and Cynicism,” *Zeitschrift für Literaturwissenschaft und Linguistik (LiLi)* 37.145 (2007): 142.

<sup>23</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 9–10. See also Joseph M. Miller, Michael H. Prosser, and Thomas W. Benson, eds., *Readings in Medieval Rhetoric* (Bloomington: U. of Indiana Press, 1973), 106 ff., esp. 118, where Bede defines *Sarcasm* as “hostile derision, laden with hate.”

<sup>24</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 159n.

specifically means the exact opposite of what is said. Sarcasm is contrary meaning but not necessarily the opposite and is defined by its “hostile derision full of hatred.”<sup>25</sup> (Contrast Sinex, Camp, and Gordon, above.) The quality of hateful derision is consistent with the true etymology of the word as “flesh tearing.”

Despite the influence of Donatus’s very systematic approach, Knox has shown that conceptions of both irony and sarcasm and their relationship fluctuated greatly over time. Knox suggests that medieval and Renaissance authors, like modern linguists and rhetoricians, were not consistent in their categorization. Unlike most modern scholars, however, they were not necessarily systematic, because of “an uncritical imitation of classical sources and love of superfluous terminology.”<sup>26</sup> Not all commentators, for instance, rigorously observed the distinction between contrary and opposite meanings for irony. A few writers, both medieval and Renaissance, did not even conform to the requirement that sarcasm be indirect, equating it with straightforward *insultatis* and direct mockery.<sup>27</sup> Others defined irony itself as derisive in the same way Donatus characterizes sarcasm. “*Sarcasmos*...illustrates arguments applicable to the remaining species [of *allegoria*], namely, that the terms had their own histories independent of *ironia*, that usually they were forms of derision which were confused with *ironia* because *ironia* was predominantly derisive....”<sup>28</sup> This arguably makes the term *sarcasmos* superfluous or requires rhetoricians to make even finer distinctions, such as that irony was humorously insulting while sarcasm was aggressively so.<sup>29</sup> By the seventeenth century, the terms could be interchangeable (The 1605 *OED* citation from clergyman John Dove simply equates irony and sarcasm: “a figure called *Ironia*, or *Sarcasmus*”).<sup>30</sup>

In the early modern era, the definition of sarcasm continued to be fluid in much the same ways. In a supplement to a 1599 edition of Angel Day’s 1586 letter-writing manual, *The English Secreterie*, sarcasm is listed under “Tropes, Figures and Schemes”:

*Ironia*, a scoffe or flout, as when wee saie, Alas good man, or to one that hath set debate or contention, you haue spun a faire thred: or to him that hath made a long speach to no pur-

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<sup>25</sup> Donatus, *Ars maior*, quoted in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475*, ed. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter. Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, vol. 16 (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 173.

<sup>26</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 156.

<sup>27</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 154.

<sup>28</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 157.

<sup>29</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 176.

<sup>30</sup> “sarcasm, n.” *OED* Online. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 1 November 2014.

pose, you haue brought forth a mighty mole-hil, or to a lewd person, you are an honest man.

*Sarcasmus*, a bitter bob as wee saie, or enuious derision, as of one arraigned for fellonie, to twit him, that hee had like to haue knockt his head against the gallowes, or of one suffering for treason to saie, that it made him hop headlesse.

*Antiphrasis*, when a word scornefullie deliuered, is understoode by his contrarie, as of a dwarfe, to saie in iest, what a gyant haue we here, or of him that telleth a matter ordinarie for strange, to saie, what a wonder telleth he, or to say, the man hath a sharpe wit, when we intend he hath a verie blunt capacitie, or of a blacke Boore woman, to saie, Will ye see a faire pigion.

*Charientismus*, as when we scoffe a man in his threatning mood to say, O good words, I pray you, or kill vs not at the first dash, or, Bite not my nose off I pray you, and such like.<sup>31</sup>

Note that what Day calls *antiphrasis* is more akin to the understanding of sarcasm as meaning the opposite of what is said in a derisive manner. In fact, *sarcasmus* is the only figure of the four that doesn't seem to have an alternative, nonliteral message. It is pure mockery, more akin to Bede's notion of sarcasm as straightforward derision and hate.<sup>32</sup>

The earliest citation for the word in English is from E.K.'s commentary on Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*: "Tom piper, an ironically Sarcasmus, spoken in derision of these rude wits." Here, although E.K. does call sarcasm "ironically," we cannot be absolutely certain what he means by that, and, in any case, as with Day, the focus is on the bitterness of the gibe rather than its indirectness. Derision seems to be the one consistent trait ascribed to sarcasm throughout the seventeenth century. The 1619 *Follie's Anatomy* refers to "harsh Sarcasmes, dissonant and smart" without specifying that they also have a double meaning. However, sarcasm's dual nature seems to become more prominent as time goes on. A 1690 Bible commentary says "No lye, but an irony...a witty way of speaking...such sarcasms Elijah used," and a 1725 text refers to "Scoffs and ironical Tartness...usually call'd a Sarcasm," directed, mostly cruelly of all, at "a dying or dead Person."<sup>33</sup>

This unrelenting emphasis among medieval and early modern rhetoricians on hostility as a (perhaps the) fundamental trait of sarcasm suggests a narrower use of the trope than has arisen in more recent times. David Kaufer refers to studies that show sarcasm "creating solidarity in work groups" where insults among friends are actually sarcastic and therefore compliments or at least allow hearers

<sup>31</sup> Williams, "troubled with a tedious discours," 187–188.

<sup>32</sup> Miller, Prosser, and Benson, 118.

<sup>33</sup> "sarcasm, n." *OED Online*, Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 1 November 2014.



to interpret them that way, thus being face-saving rather than truly hostile.<sup>34</sup> What he describes here is actually language play with a double metamessage, “mock sarcasm” in the service of bonding rather than alienation, which is the more common goal of sarcasm.<sup>35</sup> Sarcastic banter gives a literal compliment in a sarcastic tone that suggests the speaker doesn’t mean it but in a social context where the listener knows the speaker means exactly what he says. It is a hedge against sentimentality rather than sincerity in a particular kind of social setting.

Pre-modern writers, by contrast, tended to see both *ironia* and *sarcasmos* through a moral, rather than just a social, lens. Classical authors from Plato to Theophrastus characterized irony, not only as derisive, but as mean-spirited and even hypocritical.<sup>36</sup> As medieval rhetoricians mostly took a more positive view of irony and transferred the quality of mockery to sarcasm, many of them in turn disapproved of sarcasm’s use on moral grounds and often ascribed it to the sinful and to villains. Although Donatus does not elaborate on the morality of sarcasm, his use of “*plena odio*” [full of hatred] in his definition takes on a moral dimension and implies that sarcasm is a weapon of the wicked. Thus, a common example of *sarcasmos* would be the mockery of Christ by the chief priests during the buffeting in Matthew 26.68: “Prophecy to us, O Christ, who is he that smote you?” Their “command” does not, as with *ironia*, say the opposite of what is meant, but it is contrary to what the speakers believe, which is that Christ is not a prophet, it is clearly full of hatred and derision, and the speakers are to be condemned for it.<sup>37</sup> It is what a modern American might call “snark” (for which, see the “Postscript” below). A fourteenth-century anonymous commentator on the thirteenth-century *Graecismus* of Eberhardus Bethuniensis scorns anyone who uses sarcasm, ““for only carnal and bestial men who forsake reason are wont to deride others.””<sup>38</sup> Donatus’s own brief example of sarcasm that goes with his definition is from *The Aeneid*, Bk. 12, ll. 395 ff., the words of Turnus as he kills a Trojan: “There! Lying down you can measure out, Trojan, the lands and Hesperia, which you tried to conquer through war.””<sup>39</sup> While Donatus makes no further comment, we can infer that he considers the Greek Turnus to be a villain, given his source.

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34 Kaufer, “The Functions of Sarcastic Irony in Speech,” 614.

35 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 10–11.

36 Knox, *Ironia*, 139–140.

37 Knox, *Ironia*, 29.

38 Knox, *Ironia*, 173.

39 Copeland and Sluiter, *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric*, 98.

It is worth noting that, even though Donatus makes *sarcasmos* and *ironia* separate subcategories of *allegoria*, irony potentially has some of the same moral stigma as the more hateful sarcasm:

In some early Latin glossaries...*ironia* was described as a mendacious jest (*mendax iocus*). Its standing was hardly improved when Renaissance dictionaries described those who indulged in *ironia* to be derisively deceiving and to be withholding the truth; or when theorists described *ironia* as a device in which the tongue was quick to suggest one thing while the heart concealed another. How does this differ from, say, the following definition of lying given in Petrus Lombardus' (c. 1095–1160) *Sententiae*? "For this is the peculiar sin of the liar: to conceal one thing in the heart, but to express another by the tongue."<sup>40</sup>

Others, as we have seen with the seventeenth-century example of Elijah, saw it as a useful tool to indicate cleverness, satire, and arguably justifiable criticism, though the medieval examples tend to be more ambiguous than the 1690 Bible. Knox tells us that a "prevalent medieval and Renaissance conception of *sarcasmos* [is that it] was a bitter quip (*motto amaro*), and, as befitted a form of address used by the vanquisher to the vanquished, it conveyed a haughty air."<sup>41</sup> Sarcasm has always implied that the speaker feels superior to the target, and the "haughty air" opens the rhetorical technique up to the charge of the sin of Pride. If "[s]arcasm is the perception of comic agency with marked superiority,"<sup>42</sup> can *Superbia* be far behind? When Iago makes a series of sarcastic observations about Cassio but as asides, out of earshot of his target, what is he doing but exhibiting Pride, making himself feel superior about his own wit?<sup>43</sup> However, the association of sarcasm with vanquishing a foe also raises the possibility that it might be considered appropriate, or at least natural, as goading between warriors. An anonymous twelfth-century poem says "*Sarcasmos* is spoken to provoke one's enemy," and the thirteenth-century Italian grammarian, Bene de Firenze, wrongly "derived *sarcasmos* from *sarcos* meaning 'enemy' and *cosmos* meaning 'derision.'"<sup>44</sup> Consequently, just as Chaucer might use irony despite the common denigration of it on moral grounds, so might the warriors Beowulf and King Arthur, like the prophet Elijah, justly use sarcasm in a battle against a wicked enemy. Context can trump theory.

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<sup>40</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 51–52.

<sup>41</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 171.

<sup>42</sup> Jeroen Vandaele, "Narrative Humor (I): Enter Perspective," *Poetics Today* 31.4 (2010): 771.

<sup>43</sup> Lynne Magnusson, *Shakespeare and Social Dialogue: Dramatic Dialogue and Elizabethan Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 171–172.

<sup>44</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 171.

Further complicating the definition, use, and identification of sarcasm is the way it is conveyed. Knox demonstrates that, just like moderns, medieval thinkers recognized that one of the distinctive traits of sarcasm was the importance of *pronunciatio*, that is, oral delivery and body language. By extension they apply to dramatic texts, where actors have to decide how to deliver lines, and to narrative works, in which readers must decipher tone in both dialogue and narration.<sup>45</sup> For example, in the fourth book of his dialogue, *Saturnalia*, a commentary on *The Aeneid*, Macrobius reads the epic as oratory, characterizing Virgil as an orator in a court of law, using rhetoric to express and manipulate emotion.<sup>46</sup>

In the case of an actual speaker with the requisite skill, there should be little ambiguity or uncertainty for the listener about ironic intent. For a reader, however, unless a passage is explicitly identified in some way as sarcastic, word choice and circumstance are the only signals for how to read the tone of the words. There is evidence that even medieval readers, immersed in their cultural context, could have the same problems that modern readers have from a greater distance. For example, one mid-thirteenth-century parodic Latin saint's life, *St. Nemo*, illustrates the difficulty of interpreting the purpose of a parodic/ironic/sarcastic text. It plays on confusion between the Latin for "nobody" and a name. Thus, "*nemo*" is mistaken for a person named "Nemo," who is sanctified because of his revered position in the Bible: "Deus cuius ire nemo resistere potest" becomes "Nemo is immune to the wrath of God"; "his arithmetic skills were so great that only Nemo could identify the number of souls seen by John in Revelations" from Rev. 7:9, "Et vidi turbam magnam quam dinumerare nemo poterat." St. Nemo must have been "a trusted confidant, for after the Transfiguration Christ was heard to say "visionem quam vidistis nemini dixeritis" (tell the vision you have seen to [Nemo])."<sup>47</sup> Stephen Gordon believes this is a critique of "the follies of adhering to literal interpretations of the Word,"<sup>48</sup> a satire of scholasticism; however, this could just as easily be a joke on clerics whose Latin was poor and who were earlier targets of Jerome. Regardless of authorial intent, he suggests that contemporary readers of the mock saint's life got it wrong by taking it seriously: "The production of refutations against the *Nemo* tradition—see Stephanus's *Reprobratio Nefandi Sermonis* (ca. 1290), for example—suggests that not

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45 Knox, *Ironia*, 58–77.

46 Ruth Morse, *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 33–34.

47 Martha Bayless, *Parody in the Middle Ages: The Latin Tradition*, *Recentiores: Later Latin Texts and Contexts* (Ann Arbor: Univ. of Michigan Press, 1996), 57–63.

48 Gordon, "Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective," 88.

everyone was aware of the joke.”<sup>49</sup> Similarly, Knox points to a thirteenth-century German satire on the Pope and the Curia that was “sometimes...construed literally as panegyric,” prompting papal librarians in the fifteenth century to have a manuscript of it “elaborately bound and illuminated”<sup>50</sup> for the Vatican, perhaps even more embarrassing than the people who wrote serious refutations of the mock saint’s life of St. Nemo.

In *Truth and Convention in the Middle Ages: Rhetoric, Representation, and Reality*, Ruth Morse describes the medieval penchant for systematic rules and for appreciating art for conforming to known, often very complex conventions. In Macrobius, “Virgil is praised for exemplifying a series of rules, as if he had written his poetry with a checklist of figures in hand, and ticked each off as he used it; the student is encouraged in turn to read with his own mental checklist, making extracts as he goes....This in turn emphasizes an artificial kind of composition.”<sup>51</sup> On the one hand, knowing this is a medieval habit of mind would justify analyzing writers’ use of irony and sarcasm in terms of definitions and “rules” set down by medieval rhetoricians. It can be valuable to keep in mind medieval conceptions of sarcasm rather than imposing modern ones, especially with writers who show signs of having been trained in rhetoric and who do not otherwise exhibit much independence of thought. On the other hand, any study of medieval rhetoric might fall into the trap of implying that rhetorical “rules” led to stilted, formulaic literature. In fact, many writers show evidence of not being satisfied merely to follow a playbook step by step.

This is especially true because there were so many playbooks. The variety of theories of sarcasm throughout the Middle Ages and into the Early Modern period and the slipperiness of its practice mean that individual medieval and Renaissance authors did not necessarily restrict themselves to a single, rigid definition of the trope. When the medieval tradition is so diverse, one cannot and should not feel constrained to read any given text in light of one theory. This is certainly true of irony and sarcasm, so it is not necessarily anachronistic to see instances of sarcasm according to a modern definition, even if the writers themselves may have called it something else. A rose by any other name can be just as thorny.

Similarly, the essayists in this volume will demonstrate their awareness of the theories, but they are not necessarily bound by them. Keeping in mind the

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<sup>49</sup> Gordon, “Parody, Sarcasm, and Invective,” 88.

<sup>50</sup> Knox, *Ironia*, 17.

<sup>51</sup> Morse, *Truth and Convention*, 35.

cultural context of period and place, they follow the individual texts wherever they lead and illuminate them for modern readers.

## A Postscript on Terminology: *Snark* and *Sarcasm*

The fluctuating line between irony and sarcasm in the Middle Ages is analogous to the relationship between the modern understanding of sarcasm and the more recent term “snark.” As demonstrated above, today, sarcasm most commonly includes saying the opposite of what one means in a derisive and superior tone. The evolution of “snark” as a term in relation to “sarcasm” has led to a situation much like *sarcasmos* and *ironia*, from something quite different to sometimes being interchangeable. Furthermore, the fluidity of “snark” is comparable to the changes in *sarcasmos* over time and between cultures.

No one knows exactly why Lewis Carroll coined “Snark” as the name of his monstrous Boojum in 1876, but we do know that at least as early as 1866, “snark” was a verb that meant “snore” (a variant of “snork”). Within a few years of *The Hunting of the Snark*, the verb shows up with the meaning of “find fault” or “nag,” possibly influenced by the regionalism “nark” (“to annoy, exasperate, infuriate”), also from the 1880s, and conflated with “snark.” It may be worth noting that Eric Partridge’s 1949 *A Dictionary of the Underworld: British and American* suggests that “nark” is a shortened form of French *narquois*, which started out in the 1500s as a noun for a vagabond soldier, then in the 1600s referred to thieves and their slang, and by the mid-1800s was used as an adjective meaning both “cunning, deceitful” and “mocking,” a double sense that matches the range of meaning of both “snark” and “sarcasm” with their mocking double meaning. The *OED* does not put much confidence in this connection, however, and “snark” as a noun is still defined only as Carroll’s whimsical, elusive monster. By at least 1906, with E. Nesbit’s *The Railway Children*, the adjective “snarky” had come into being with the meaning “Irritable, short-tempered.” The *OED* relates this to “snark” as “snore,” but almost certainly the connection to “snark” as “nag” makes more sense. “Irritable, short-tempered” remains the only official definition of “snarky” as a British usage.<sup>52</sup>

In America, “snarky” started out the same way. The 1993 *Random House Unabridged Dictionary*, for example, considers “snarky” to be “Chiefly Brit[ish] Slang” and defines it only as “testy or irritable.” The 1998 tenth edition of *Mer-*

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52 “snark,” “snarky,” and “nark,” *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2014. Web. 8 June 2016.

*Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary* no longer identifies it as primarily British but similarly defines it only as “crotchety, snappish.” However, the current *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* gives 1999 as the first appearance of “snark” as a back-formation of “snarky” meaning “an attitude or expression of mocking irreverence and sarcasm,”<sup>53</sup> and now the online collegiate version has added “sarcastic, impertinent, or irreverent in tone or manner” as a second definition of “snarky.”<sup>54</sup> The word “or” here is key to the range “snarky” can have. Merriam-Webster.com includes this usage note:

Snarky vs. Sarcastic

Some have questioned whether *snarky* is a real word. There can be no doubt that it is; the adjective has been recorded in English since 1906. Its original meaning, “crotchety, snappish,” has largely been overtaken, however, by the far more frequently-encountered sense “sarcastic, impertinent or irreverent.” The precise difference between utterances described as *sarcastic* and *snarky* will vary somewhat based on the individual using each word. Some feel that *sarcastic* usually implies irony, or stating the opposite of what is really intended (for example, “thank you so much for your promptness” spoken to someone who arrives late), whereas *snarky* implies simple impertinence or irreverence (as when *Downton Abbey*’s Dowager Countess asks Isobel Crawley, “does it ever get cold on the moral high ground?”)<sup>55</sup>

Meanwhile, the online *American Heritage Dictionary* reverses the order of definitions in *Merriam-Webster*, following common usage rather than chronology: “1. Rudely sarcastic or disrespectful; snide. 2. Irritable or short-tempered; irascible.”<sup>56</sup> And use of “snark” and “snarky” remain common, indeed. As of April 2017, a Google search returns 10,800,000 hits for <snark>, 16,900,000 for <snarky>.

Thus, “snarky” went from referring to a personality or a statement that is curmudgeonly and purely derisive to being interchangeable with “sarcastic”. And yet, certainly in both British and American usage, a snarky comment does not necessarily require the double meaning that is almost always a defining characteristic of sarcasm. The difference between a pure insult and a snarky one can be only the use of a tone we associate with sarcasm, superior, snide, even sneering. The snarky insult can be direct, or it can have a sarcastic double mean-

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53 “snark,” n. *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* Online. Merriam-Webster, 2015. Web. 8 June 2016.

54 “snarky,” adj. *Merriam-Webster Collegiate Dictionary* Online. Merriam-Webster, 2008. Web. 8 June 2016.

55 “snark,” n. *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary* Online. Merriam-Webster, 2015. Web. 8 June 2016.

56 “snarky,” adj. *American Heritage Dictionary* Online. Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 2015. Web. 8 June 2016.

ing. Medieval *sarcasmos* could be either one, as well. What snark and sarcasm have in common, self-evident in the tone, is the intent to wound. Since snark can lack the cleverness of sarcasm's indirection, it can be perceived through the lens of its original British meaning as being even more socially unpleasant. However, sarcasm and snark, whether synonyms or variations on a theme and whether called that or not, have been useful tools to rhetoricians and to writers.

## The Use of Abuse

If the conceptions of sarcasm in the pre-modern and early modern periods are variable, the various uses of sarcasm are legion. The essays in this volume are arranged more or less chronologically according to their subjects. The intention is not to suggest that there is a consistent evolution in the use of sarcasm through the Middle Ages and into the Renaissance. It is simply an objective way to organize such a broad range of topics. However, the arrangement does create certain logical, cultural connections that may or may not be coincidental. The cultures and languages treated cover all of Europe and beyond: Old English, Old Norse, Old and Middle High German, Old Irish, Middle Scots, Middle English, Old French, Latin, Italian, Galician-Portuguese, Early Modern English, and Arabic. There is hardly a genre in which writers of the period could not find a way to employ sarcasm. The essays cover heroic epics, sagas, and romances, comic tales and plays, fabliaux and fables, saints' lives and historical poems, political letters and treatises, *cantigas* and three kinds of Arabic "speech acts," even curses. Examples range from the intellectually subtle to the raunchily X-rated. The users of sarcasm are villains, heroes, shrews, devils, saints, popes, heretics, and, of course, the authors themselves. Sometimes the essayists indulge, because sarcasm is catching and because the best way to understand a tool is to use it.

The volume begins with Rick McDonald's essay on Old English poetry, not only because it is some of the oldest literature in the volume, but mainly because McDonald's focus is on issues of translation, so vitally important when not only narrative context but word choice provides the sometimes cryptic signals readers have for sarcasm. McDonald argues that identifying sarcasm in a text, even one written in a reader's native tongue, is essentially an act of translation. He examines "The Battle of Maldon," "The Battle of Brunanburg," and, of course, *Beowulf*, all heroic poems where one would expect sarcasm in the martial challenges, *flytings*, and banter between warriors, but also saints' lives. In the process, he reveals how humor and snark were present in Anglo-Saxon society in ways that many critics of the last century would have denied. He also joins in the spirit of

the humor in his texts by constructing his essay as a Dave Letterman style Top Ten List.

Christopher Abram follows by mixing medieval and modern in a different way, linking internet trolls to the *trolls* in an Icelandic *þáttur*, or tale. The heroic ethos of both Germanic cultures, the Anglo-Saxon and the Norse, seems connected to the prevalence of sarcasm in their literature, but *Sneglu-Halla þáttur* depicts sarcasm in a very different setting than the Old English poems and with very different antagonists. Here the snarky verbal combat is between the historical eleventh-century Norwegian warrior king, Haraldr Sigurðarson harðráði (“hard ruler”), and Halli, a poet and master of derision. It will come as no surprise that the poet is the victor. However, what is surprising is his exploitation of so many verbal weapons—ambiguity, disingenuousness, abusive language, sarcasm, and humor—to flout the courtesies of Haraldr’s court. At the same time, like the trolls of the internet age, Halli gains a grudging prestige by revealing the flaws and limitations of others.

Medieval Irish literature is also noted for its verbal duels between kings and poets, but Máire Johnson’s essay explores a different but analogous cultural impulse to sarcasm, not the heroic, but the religious and legal. She examines the *Lives* of medieval Irish saints and the texts of Old Irish law to arrive at a highly original reading of the presence of sarcasm in stories of saints’ curses. The curses themselves are straightforward with no opposite, contrary, or double meaning at all. It is in the magical effects of those curses that Johnson finds sarcastic intent and ironic, even snarky commentary on the saints’ enemies.

The volume then moves briefly out of Europe and into Arabia. Jeremy Farrell examines thirteenth-century Arabic texts that bear comparison to the Irish in that they are mostly non-fiction and are written in a context that is similarly suffused with religion and religious division. In addition, the range of pre-modern Arab theorizing on speech acts that exhibit a conflict between “apparent” and “hidden” meanings is reminiscent of the ideas of Donatus, Bede, Geoffrey de Vinsauf, and other European thinkers. However, Farrell brings modern linguistic theory to bear on a variety of genres, such as exegesis, biography, and poetry, going well beyond the current state of scholarship.

The next essay returns to Europe, in some ways to the center of medieval Europe, in fact, and the crossroads of culture and of historical periods, Italy in the *trecento* and *quattrocento*, on the threshold of the Renaissance. Nicolino Applauso looks at sarcasm as a political instrument in the work of Dante and of his teacher, Brunetto Latini, as well as in the responses of their antagonists, including the pope and his representatives. Brunetto’s diplomatic “Letter to Pavia” and Dante’s political treatise, *Monarchia*, were both undiplomatic and impolitic in their use of sarcasm, and Applauso explores the very real effects they had on



Italian politics and public opinion, including sarcastic papal responses, angry public demonstrations, and violence.

Debra E. Best moves to lighter fare with the Middle English romance, *Bevis of Hampton*. Best analyzes a use of sarcasm and snark that Plato and Donatus could not have imagined, the creation of laughter as a force for good. She argues that control of language through sarcasm and the laughter it evokes contributes to the growth of both hero and heroine. Laughter and sarcasm also establish relationships between characters and between the fictional creations and the reader. Hidden just behind this particular use of humor as self-assertion and self-defense, Best tells us, is the theme of the power of language itself.

Brian S. Lee also finds new ideas in the more familiar territory of Chaucer's only Arthurian romance, *The Wife of Bath's Tale*, as well as *The Owl and the Nightingale* and John Clerk's *Gest Hystoriale of the Destruction of Troy*, among others. Lee applies theories of sarcasm that span more than sixteen hundred years, from the ancient, anonymous *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 80 B.C.), wrongly attributed to Cicero in the Middle Ages, to the early medieval *Etymologiae* of Isidore of Seville (7<sup>th</sup> cent. A.D.), to the Renaissance English rhetorician George Puttenham's *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). Lee finds remarkable consistency over time in viewing sarcasm as a weapon to assert power over an adversary, all exemplified in these mostly fourteenth-century texts.

Esther Bernstein moves north and ahead about one hundred years to the so-called Scottish Chaucerian, Robert Henryson. Like Chaucer, Henryson uses traditional forms, in this case fables, but, Bernstein argues, in ways that inject complexity into a genre that evokes simple expectations in readers. One way he does this, she says, is by manipulating both narrative structure and language itself to make readers complicit in a conventional response that the fable ultimately shows to be wrong-headed. Thus, Henryson maneuvers readers into recognizing a meaning opposite to the apparent one, a sarcastic trick played on the audience. However, as in *Bevis of Hampton*, Henryson's objective is not scorn but improvement, not of his characters, but of his readership.

Further south, just as Bernstein demonstrates how Henryson uses conventional fables to subvert the norms, Patricia Sokolski turns another genre on its head, but in the opposite direction. Old French fabliaux, usually considered the ultimate subversive genre in medieval literature, Sokolski argues can often be used to support the social order its characters violate. In particular, she contends, socio-economic changes in Northern France during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries led to a particular concern with disharmony in marriage, typified in fabliaux of the time by sarcasm used by husbands and especially wives against each other. In depicting marital sarcasm as destructive instead of clever,

the fabliau form, usually thought to be the high point (or low point) of anti-establishment literature, instead supports the doctrines of the Church.

If the fabliaux of Northern France became less disruptive of social convention, the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* of Galicia took up the slack. Ellen Lorraine Friedrich examines a form that is not often studied and, she believes, may be under-appreciated. These particular Galician-Portuguese *cantigas* may have more to do with personal vendettas than the social order or may be purely frivolous, but they fall into two categories that correspond to one modern distinction between sarcasm and snark, as well as the changeable medieval taxonomy of *sarcasmos*, *ironia*, and *insultatio*. One uses veiled references and indirection; the other, direct attack, usually naming the target. Friedrich concentrates on a subset of these derisive *cantigas* that uses explicit and grotesque sexual imagery, rivaling anything in the saltiest Gallic fabliaux, that gives this volume its X-rating. Keep away from the children.

Albrecht Classen delves into an even darker side of human nature in the use of sarcasm in Old Norse, Old and Middle High German works either as a substitute for physical violence or a way to cap it off with a final, verbal kick to the groin. Classen points out that previous scholars have assumed sarcasm plays little role in these mostly heroic works, but medieval writers and readers were well aware of the power of sarcasm to depict particularly bitter strife. He begins with the Old Norse *Njáls Saga* and then moves to a range of medieval German texts, “Hildebrandslied” and even the courtly *Tristan* of Gottfried von Strassburg. In so doing, like other essayists in the book, Classen demonstrates that the characters in the stories, as well as the authors and their readers, are closer to us than some might assume.

The Prince of Darkness is at the center of Elza C. Tiner’s examination of the York *Fall of the Angels*. Like the medieval theorists who characterize sarcasm as a trope for the wicked, Tiner points out how the play depicts the origin of sarcasm in the originator of sin and his followers. However, she goes further by placing the York cycle and this particular play in the context of Church politics of the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries. It is no surprise that plays written by clerics and sponsored by the Church should support Catholic doctrine as much as fabliaux in Northern France, but Tiner’s surprising and original argument is that *The Fall of the Angels* has a very specific target, Wyclif and the Lollards, who challenge the pope as Lucifer challenged God and who employ sarcasm to create disharmony.

Scott O’Neil also deals with conflict between an individual and a pope and with the “intellectual violence” of personal feuds in Renaissance Italy. Lorenzo Valla exposes the forgery of the Donation of Constantine, a challenge to papal power, and he does so with well-known vitriol. Martin Luther later used Valla’s

exposé as an example of papal corruption and a call to break away from the Church. O'Neil, however, argues that Valla subtly employs two layers of sarcasm, the harshest and most overt aimed at deriding the forger of the Donation. The other, O'Neil shows, is subtextual, an indirect warning to the pope to reform rather than a frontal assault on the institution that Luther wanted it to be. Then, as now, sarcasm was easy to misread.

The volume closes with Shakespeare but also harks back to medieval traditions, conjoining the Middle Ages and the Renaissance by way of the figure of the shrew, particularly of the female kind. While acknowledging that *The Taming of the Shrew* is rife with sarcasm, Joe Ricke disputes the notion that Kate's final monologue on marriage is sarcastic and uses that speech, in comparison to others in the play, to illustrate the difficulty of "unpacking" discourse that may or may not use sarcasm and the importance of context in doing so. This takes him back to earlier, medieval dramatic representations of shrewishness, sometimes in surprising figures (the Virgin Mary as a shrew?), as part of a continuum that leads back to sarcastic dainty Kate. And Ricke makes his own continuum, ending the volume as Rick McDonald began it, with some lighthearted fake sarcasm of his own.

These essays on the intricacies of the use of a single, particularly malleable rhetorical trope, sarcasm, demonstrate the variety and richness of rhetorical practice across genres, time, and cultures. The authors show how close scrutiny of medieval texts and contexts, of the skillful choice of words combined with distinctive situations (the "language worlds"<sup>57</sup> of the writers and readers), can help us, like Hamlet, "by indirection find direction out."

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57 Walker Gibson, "Authors, Speakers, Readers, and Mock Readers," in *Reader-Response Criticism: From Formalism to Post-Structuralism*, ed. Jane P. Tompkins (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 5.



Rick McDonald

# Encountering Snarks in Anglo-Saxon Translation

## One Translator's Top 10 List

### Fit the First: The Opening Gambit

"We will hunt for the Snark" they cried with a whoop!  
In a CFP crafted with care.  
Baragona and Rambo recruited a Troop  
Who thought Snarking a bit of a dare  
  
"There is Snark in the Theatre," I tell you quite true  
"There is Snark in the Home and at War;  
We must find them and tag them for science's due;  
Snarks are nothing that scholars ignore."<sup>1</sup>

With a nod to Lewis Carroll, the great white snark-hunter himself, and a recognition of my debt to this collection's editors, I begin my perilous journey into the snark-pit which is Anglo-Saxon translation and interpretation. Certainly, snarks can be found in Anglo-Saxon texts, although they can be difficult to subdue, and there is always the threat that one will encounter the boojum of snarks and vanish away like Lewis Carroll's heroic Baker.<sup>2</sup> I'll admit that the pursuit of snark within a scholarly essay could be perceived by some as a foolhardy endeavor.

I am, for all intents and purposes, a general medievalist, but I'm a competent Anglo-Saxon translator, and I have always found a fair amount of dark humor in Anglo-Saxon texts. I believe critics no longer take as seriously some of the earlier scholarly arguments that there is little to no humor in Anglo-Saxon literature, claims that were often supported with comments made by Fr. Klaeber and D.W. Robertson's contention (in *A Preface to Chaucer*) that the expe-

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A version of this paper was presented at the 2015 International Congress on Medieval Studies.

1 As I cannot write on snark without fitting tribute to Lewis Carroll, I determined that I should follow his poetic lead in hunting snark and reference my debt to Carroll, himself, and Alan Baragona and Elizabeth Rambo, the editors of this essay collection in my opening poetic snarklet.  
2 Here I allude to "Fit the Eighth" of Lewis Carroll's *The Hunting of the Snark*, wherein the Baker vanishes from existence when he attempts to capture a snark which turns out to be of the boojum variety. Lewis Carroll, *The Hunting of the Snark*. Project Gutenberg, January 8, 2013, accessed March 15, 2015 <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/13/13-h/13-h.htm>.

rience of medieval individuals is so drastically different from our own world as to make comparisons with how we think, act, and feel unproductive. I find myself in agreement with Frederick Bracher in his “Understatement in Old English Poetry,” that “I see no *a priori* reason for assuming, as Klaeber does, that ‘in such a gloomy atmosphere there can be no room for levity, fun, or humor.’”<sup>3</sup> John D. Niles similarly questions Robertson’s denial of the similarities between medieval and modern thought and feelings in his “Byrhtnoth’s Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture.”<sup>4</sup> I prefer the attitude expressed by E.L. Ridsen in “Teaching Anglo-Saxon Humor,” where he asserts, “I would like to suggest that *Beowulf* and Anglo-Saxon culture, and more generally the medieval heroic world, had a more varying and sophisticated sense of humor than readers might first suspect.”<sup>5</sup> A good exemplar of this would be Harold Zimmerman’s 2015 article for *Pedagogy*, where he uses Aelfric Bata’s *Colloquies* to show how humor was an integral part of Anglo-Saxon culture by looking at the sample discussions of Anglo-Saxon students within Bata’s work, concluding “the boys depicted within the colloquies led lives of mind and spirit, but also liked to fool around, get drunk, insult each other, and laugh.”<sup>6</sup> Jonathan Wilcox’s year 2000 collection *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature* provides eight essays that ought to convince any disbelievers that humor was alive and well in the Anglo-Saxon period and that, although times have changed, we are still able to laugh along with our ancestors. I particularly agree with Hugh Magennis when he argues “The Anglo-Saxons clearly did appreciate humorous incongruity and took pleasure in unlikely correspondences and juxtapositions.”<sup>7</sup> Of course snark is not exactly humor, but snark and humor are clearly not unrelated. I have found Anglo-Saxon snark in a number of genres; I especially think the language’s penchant for both boasting and dramatic understatement, as revealed by Anglo-Saxon poets’ frequent deployment of litotes, makes the literature a promising hunting ground for Lewis Carroll’s elusive beast.

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3 Frederick Bracher, “Understatement in Old English Poetry,” *PMLA* 52.4 (1937): 923.

4 John D. Niles, “Byrhtnoth’s Laughter and the Poetics of Gesture,” in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 13.

5 E.L. Ridsen, “Teaching Anglo-Saxon Humor or Yes, Virginia, There is Humor in *Beowulf*,” *Studies in Medieval and Renaissance Teaching* 9.1 (2002): 35.

6 Harold C. Zimmerman, “Drinking Feasts and Insult Battles: Bringing Anglo-Saxon Pedagogy into the Contemporary Classroom,” *Pedagogy* 13.2 (2013): 242.

7 Hugh Magennis, “A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to Heaven: Humorous Incongruity in Old English Saints’ Lives,” in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer 2000), 138.

## Fit the Second: The Defining of the Snark

In order to proceed we need a definition of “snark.” The introduction of this volume covers some of the various possibilities for the history of the word “snark.” I find most convincing the 1999 *Merriam-Webster Unabridged Dictionary*’s claim that “snark” is a backformation from “snarky.” Nevertheless part of me likes the more informal definition offered by UrbanDictionary.com, where “snark” is a portmanteau word composed of “snide” and “remark.” Even if their explanation lacks etymological depth, as an invention of the king of portmanteau words Lewis “Jabberwocky” Carroll, it seems appropriate that “snark” would be a portmanteau, although it could be argued it is not used as a portmanteau within Carroll’s poem. The *OED* refrains from suggesting an etymology of “snark” within its entry. Nevertheless, by extrapolation from the information the *OED* provides for cognate words, “snark” could have come from similar sounding verbs in North Frisian, Swedish, and German meaning “to snort.” Our modern usage almost certainly is a backformation of “snarky,” an adjective that the *OED* finds multiple uses of in the first few decades of the 1900s. Looking at the group of related morphemes circulating around the first half of the 1900s, snark involves irritability, short temperedness, nagging, and finding fault.<sup>8</sup> Snark from its inception has been associated with derision. One of the more prolific authors on snark in our current century would be Lawrence Dorfman, who defines “snark” in his 2009 *The Snark Handbook: A Reference Guide to Verbal Sparring* as “a smartass remark,” “a slyly disparaging comment,” and “biting wit”;<sup>9</sup> all of these definitions fit well within the historical framework of snark from the early 1900s, for the Anglo-Saxon period, and especially the present day. The idea of “snark” as “biting wit” nicely associates the term with the similar concept of “sarcasm,” which comes from the Latin *sarcasmos* or flesh tearing.<sup>10</sup>

For my purposes snark is a behavior (most often an utterance) which results in its target experiencing some level of mockery. Snark is a condescending remark or gesture directed at a recipient for either antagonistic or ludic purposes. It is closely related to insults, a form of speech act which Jucker and Taavitsainen argue is present in Anglo-Saxon literature and “trends through time up until the present day.”<sup>11</sup> Snark is not always overtly humorous, but it often is; it is not al-

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<sup>8</sup> “Snark,” *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

<sup>9</sup> Lawrence Dorfman, *The Snark Handbook: A Reference Guide to Verbal Sparring* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 2015), preface.

<sup>10</sup> “Sarcasm.” *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*.

<sup>11</sup> Andreas Jucker and Irma Taavitsainen, “Diachronic Speech Act Analysis: Insults from Flyting to Flaming,” *Journal of Historical Pragmatics* 1.1 (2000): 70.

ways abusive, but it sometimes is. Like sarcasm or sardonic wit, snark requires interpretation and a proper understanding of the context within which it is being deployed. The end result of my defining process is that, as with so many things in our post post-structural world, snark is often in the eye of the beholder. In identifying my 10 instances of snark, I will attempt, as much as possible, to provide you with the vantage point whence my eye beholdeth the snark.

In their 1997 study, “Interpreting Figurative Statements,” Albert Katz and Penny Pexman provide some insights into ironic and sarcastic statements. They show how incongruity between what a speaker says and what we believe about that speaker affects how strongly an audience experiences irony.<sup>12</sup> Overall they find that an increased understanding of the context from which an ironic or sarcastic statement is generated aids in resolving any ambiguity inherent to ironic statements.<sup>13</sup> In a later, related study, Christopher Lee and Katz examine how sarcasm differs from irony in requiring a target victim. They find that “ridicule of a specific victim is one way in which sarcasm differs from irony.”<sup>14</sup> Snark is in many ways similar to sarcasm, but there can be snark without a clear victim, although a possibility exists that the victim of the free-floating snark could be perceived as the remark’s audience or some non-present imagined victim. I find myself heartened in my quest for snark by the ideas expressed by T.A. Shippey in his “Folly and Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Humor.” While defining Anglo-Saxon humor he states: “I am arguing for a sardonic quality in Anglo-Saxon humor, triggered above all by any too easy optimism, and leading on the one hand to contempt, which may be cruel and derisive, for the laughter of fools, and on the other hand to a more concealed admiration for those who can view uncomfortable realities with an amusement at the gap between them and the wishes of those who experience them *even when the latter includes themselves*” (italics in original).<sup>15</sup> The snark I am pursuing is clearly related to Shippey’s sardonic Anglo-Saxon humor, reassuring me that we are truly on a hunt for snark and not snipe.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Albert Katz and Penny Pexman, “Interpreting Figurative Statements: Speaker Occupation can Change Metaphor Irony,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 12.1 (1997): 20.

<sup>13</sup> Katz and Pexman, “Interpreting Figurative Statements,” 48.

<sup>14</sup> Christopher Lee and Albert Katz, “The Differential Role of Ridicule in Sarcasm and Irony,” *Metaphor and Symbol* 13.1 (1998): 1.

<sup>15</sup> T.A. Shippey, “‘Grim Wordplay’: Folly and Wisdom in Anglo-Saxon Humor,” in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 39.

<sup>16</sup> For those unfamiliar, a “snipe hunt” is a rite of passage in many scouting organizations where a naïve individual is told to wait numerous hours in the dark, possibly scary, undoubtedly mosquito-infested woods for an elusive snipe to appear. No snipes are ever caught, but many



## Fit the Third: Snarking Anglo-Saxon Translation

I have always been fascinated by the relation between translation and interpretation and flummoxed by commentators who behave as if there can be translation without interpretation. There is no one to one relation between an original Old English edition of a text and even the most faithful, intelligent, painstaking translation. In my 1997 dissertation, I discussed at length the problems created by scholarly editions of texts and translations which rely too heavily on an uncritical acceptance of the work of previous translators and editors and how that resulted in the illusion that Anglo-Saxon texts inherently lack persistent ambiguity.<sup>17</sup> In establishing Anglo-Saxon as an important literary language, scholars strove to present texts as clear, meaningful and worthwhile. Often they felt the need to support their emendations of texts by highlighting the limitations of the extant manuscripts which contained scribal error and attesting to their scholarly capacity to resolve any errant manuscript errors. In his contribution to D.G. Scragg's and Paul Szarmach's *The Editing of Old English*, Michael Lapidge expresses such ideas, and he is far from alone in his belief that editors "have a responsibility to conserve the transmitted text when it is sound, but—and here I dissent from the prevailing opinion—to emend it when it is not....The editor's first duty is not to dictionary makers, not to beginning students, not to historians, not to 'trouble makers,'...but to someone far more important than any of these—the author."<sup>18</sup> Of course from my position as a post-structural theorist looking for possible snarky manipulations of language, I am never entirely confident that one can know or recover what the author intended. My position is that any snark I find might or might not be "intended," and it is up to my audience to judge the viability of whatever snark I perceive.

And I am not alone in my questioning of any uncritical acceptance of scholarship's ability to reveal an Anglo-Saxon *Ur*-text behind any given manuscript. Within Scragg and Szarmach's collection on Old English editing, Antonette di Paolo Healey's observation about the editorial neatening up of words which run counter to grammatical rules (rules not formally known to the Anglo-Saxon author or scribe—owing to the nonexistence of any contemporary gram-

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snipe hunters are subsequently mocked for their participation in this somewhat mandatory hazing ritual.

<sup>17</sup> Richard McDonald, "Mapping Polysemous Language in the Middle Ages: Mystics, Scholars, Poets," (Dissertation, University of South Florida, 1997), 35–40.

<sup>18</sup> Michael Lapidge, "On the Emendation of Old English Texts," in *The Editing of Old English: Papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference*, ed. D. G. Scragg, and Paul E. Szarmach (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 67.

mar handbook) highlights the problem that scholarly editorial decisions can have for lexicographers.<sup>19</sup> Moreover, she presents a number of Old English words whose ambiguity often vex editors and translators of prose, adding that “verse particularly is open to ambiguity.”<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein, Peter Clemoes’s *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* seeks to rehabilitate some of the received scholarly pronouncements about the formulaic nature of Old English verse. He claims that recurrent word patterns and kennings which many critics have treated merely as oral formulas to assist the scop/scribe’s memory were much more than “formulas”: “It [the possibly formulaic word or word group] was semantic potential in a received form of wording. The meaning existed through the wording.”<sup>21</sup> For Clemoes, in the poet’s decision between two metrically and alliteratively equivalent words, such as “hordburh” [treasure stronghold] and “hleoburh” [sheltering stronghold], “the choice between them was not dictated by style for style’s sake, but by the distinction of meaning called for by the differing narrative contexts.”<sup>22</sup> Although the Anglo-Saxon terms are quite similar, the subtle difference between “treasure stronghold” and “sheltering stronghold” leads to the poet’s selection of either based primarily upon their lexical differences. Poets were clearly choosing carefully between variants of words that differ for only subtle shades of meaning. Translation (or the identification of snark, as in this case) requires a recognition of the ability of Anglo-Saxon to achieve a subtlety of meaning that is sometimes lost or overlooked in an attempt to project certainty regarding one’s editorial or translational decisions. Raymond Tripp argues for a complete reconsideration of major Anglo-Saxon texts which increasingly acknowledges the pervasive word play of their poets: “To reveal the sinews of the poet’s humor, new emphasis needs to be placed upon the ways in which word play is inherent in the poet’s frame of mind and his frame of mind is inherent in the linguistics of cultural conflict [often between pagan and Christian expectations].”<sup>23</sup>

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19 Antonette diPaolo Healey. “The Search for Meaning,” in *The Editing of Old English: papers from the 1990 Manchester Conference*, ed. D.G. Scragg & Paul E. Szarmach (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1994), 88.

20 Healey, “Search for Meaning,” 95.

21 Peter Clemoes, *Interactions of Thought and Language in Old English Poetry* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 126.

22 Clemoes, *Interactions*, 135.

23 Raymond Tripp, “Humor, Wordplay, and Semantic Resonance in *Beowulf*,” in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 51.

## Fit the Fourth: A Snarkin' Safari

With these preliminary remarks about the nature of snark and Anglo-Saxon translation established, it's time to dive into the mere of Anglo-Saxon texts and attempt to apprehend some snark—which hopefully survive the translation process. As someone who has just examined a large quantity of scholarship to aid in my identification of snark in Anglo-Saxon texts, I cannot resist observing that, while I did not find examples of Anglo-Saxon snark in every piece of scholarship I read, I did identify a fair amount of snark in Anglo-Saxonists' scholarly arguments directed both at previous scholarly pronouncement and critics who fail to interpret texts in a manner consonant with the writer's opinion. My post-structural training frequently causes me to lament that scholars still cannot be convinced that there are many different interpretations possible for every text.

Although a concept that has been around for more than 100 years, snark seems like a quintessentially contemporary phenomenon. Within the remainder of this essay, I hope to identify one of today's hottest linguistic constructions in English's earliest texts. One of the snarkiest genres in our contemporary world is the numbered list. Although ubiquitous across today's social media platforms, David Letterman,<sup>24</sup> for my generation, will always serve as the progenitor of the snarky "Top Ten List" format. So, keeping one eye on the present while mining the Anglo-Saxon past for its snarkiest tidbits: get your cameras ready, stay alert, and keep your arms and legs inside the vehicle at all times as we embark on an Old English snarkfari.

### #10 Wondrous Things and Snarky Riddlers

When is a riddle snarky? They are funny and sarcastic; they sometimes lead the solution-finder into momentary discomfort and this, arguably, could create a fertile environment for snark. As D.K. Smith points out in "Humor in Hiding," the original purpose of the riddle game was to cause the riddle-solver to guess incorrectly.<sup>25</sup> Especially with the double-meaning sexual riddles, the riddle's solution would result in laughter and embarrassment, once the innocent answer is

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<sup>24</sup> David Letterman hosted *Late Night with David Letterman*, a comedic talk show, for more than 33 years, during which his snarky lists of top 10 reasons for almost anything were a wildly popular component.

<sup>25</sup> D.K. Smith, "Humor in Hiding: Laughter Between the Sheets in the Exeter Book Riddles," in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 82.

revealed. There is something snarky about baiting your audience into an embarrassing situation. For example riddle 25<sup>26</sup> plays on how the audience's misinterpretation of a carefully (and snarkily) worded description of an onion will cause them to guess "penis" as the solution to the riddle, allowing the riddler to tease the answerer about their unnecessarily sexual interpretation. Smith explains that "the humor of these [sexual] riddles would have arisen from the confusion between high and low discourse and the imagined incongruity between the sexual solutions and the polite setting."<sup>27</sup> There would seem to be evidence of this type of snark in at least 8 of the traditional *Exeter Book* riddles. Below, I provide the riddle number and a sexual then nonsexual solution to each riddle to refresh your memory: (12—Female Masturbation/Ox Hide; 25—Penis/Onion; 37—Sex Act/Bellows; 44—Penis/Key; 45—Penis/Dough; 54—Sex/Churning Butter; 61—Vagina/Shirt; 62—Penis/Poker).

I am also intrigued by the possibility suggested by Jonathan Wilcox in his 1996 article on mock riddles in Old English for *Studies in Philology* that riddles 19 and 86 are trick riddles. If he is correct that riddles 19 and 86 are "neck riddles" intended to lead the readers on a merry goose chase of possible misinterpretations for a riddle whose actual solution is hidden in a play on words, then the riddler's violation of the rules of the game—that a riddle should be solvable from information included within the riddle—make both 19 and 86 mock riddles.<sup>28</sup> The word play in question revolves around a frequently emended line included in both poems. Riddle 86 ends with the statement: "Saga hwaet ic hatte" [say what I am called], which editors have tended to emend to "Saga hwaet hio hatte" [say what it is called], but if the solution to this riddle is, as Wilcox conjectures, "I am called the riddler," then, there is a mock solution to this riddle. The emended change from "I" to "it" misleads the audience to think the riddle is answered by a word denoting some thing, but if this is a trick riddle, then the answer may just be the riddler's name, and that's pretty snarky.

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<sup>26</sup> For my numbering of the Exeter book riddles I am following the order established by George Phillip Krapp and Elliot Van Kirk Dobbie, eds., *The Exeter Book*, Anglo-Saxon Poetic Records 3 (New York, 1936).

<sup>27</sup> Smith, "Humor in Hiding," 82.

<sup>28</sup> Jonathan Wilcox, "Mock-Riddles in Old English: Exeter Riddles 86 and 19," *Studies in Philology* 93.2 (1996): 182.

## #9 Beowulf Feeds the Sea Monsters a Snark Sandwich

As part of Beowulf's reply to Unferth's flyting, Beowulf sets the record straight about what happened during his swimming contest against Breca. A "fah feonds-catha" [hostile enemy]—a "mihtig mere-deor" [mighty sea-beast] has dragged him to the bottom of the sea, where "lath-geteonan" [evil harmers] threaten him severely. The sea monsters are biting his "beado-hraegl" [war garment] and trying to eat him. He pulls out his sword and serves them a very different meal than they desire: "Ic him þenode / deoran sweorde, ~ swa hit gedefe waes"<sup>29</sup> (560b-561) [I them served noble sword as was fitting]. The snarky scenario is as follows: Beowulf is swimming in the open sea, trying to beat Breca in a swimming contest, and an enormous sea-monster drags him to the bottom where a bunch of sea-beasts attempt to chew through his byrnie, but he serves them some "deoran sweorde" [lovely sword] instead. The only problem with this example is that it may be multiply snarky in that not only the creatures, but the audience, Unferth, and possibly Breca may all be the recipients of this snark sandwich. Hugh Magennis similarly defines this as a humorous moment in *Beowulf*, commenting "Beowulf plays insistently with the language of decorous feasting in the incongruous context of mortal combat," and explaining "he [Beowulf] served (thenode) them his sword at the banquet at which they intended to feast on him."<sup>30</sup> Beowulf serves up a snarky flyting to Unferth, defiantly asserts his dominance over Breca in the swimming contest, and ludically snarks the entire audience (both Dane and contemporary) with word play where feasting becomes slaying.

## #8 A Snark Tsunami of Bitter Beer

When St. Andrew from the *Andreas* has finally endured enough traditionally hagiographic torture to substantiate his apostolic street cred, he takes the fight to the Mermedonians, unleashing a mighty prayer. He instructs the pillars outside the prison walls, "nu ðe ælmihtig / hateð, heofona cyning, ~ þæt ðu hrædllice / on þis fræte folc ~ forð onsende / wæter widrynig ~ to wera cwealme, /

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<sup>29</sup> All translations from Old English throughout the essay are mine. For Old English excerpts from *Beowulf*, I consulted editions by C.L. Wrenn and W.F. Bolton, Howell Chickering and the very helpful website: Internet Sacred Text Archive, [www.sacred-texts.com](http://www.sacred-texts.com).

<sup>30</sup> Magennis, "Funny Thing Happened," 139 and 138.

geofon geotende” (1505b-1509a).<sup>31</sup> [Now Almighty God, heaven’s king, commands you hastily, on this obstinate folk, to send forth water storming to kill the people, ocean over flowing]. As the flood begins to rise, the poet weaves some snark into his depiction of the drowning warriors, associating the highly corrosive salt water they are ingesting with an overindulgence in particularly bitter beer. “þæt wæs sorgbyrþen, / biter beorþegu. ~ Byrlas ne gældon, / ombehtþegnas. ~ þær wæs ælcum genog / fram dæges orde ~ drync sona gearu” (1533b-1536). [That was a load of trouble, bitter beer; the cup-bearers were not impeded, those dutiful servants; there was ale enough from daybreak on; each man had his drink soon finished]. Johnathan Wilcox, in his “Eating People is Wrong,” emphasizes the importance of the corrosiveness of this salty water which the Mermedonians are forced to imbibe, pointing out that those who had eaten others and intended to eat Andrew instead were eaten by the corrosive flood of salt water.”<sup>32</sup> Associating the drowning of evil Mermedonians with drinkers who over indulge in beer snarkily accentuates the biblical notion that we reap what we sow, and the text considerably softens the punishment when all but the worst 14 of the Mermedonians are resurrected and then happily convert to Christianity.

## #7 Artisanal English Snark

The Battle of Brunanburg is often considered one of the most important and decisive victories for establishing British identity, and many historians believe it is the most significant battle on the island prior to the Battle of Hastings. The poetic account of the battle from the *Anglo-Saxon Chronicle* in 937 may inaugurate snark as a time-honored British attribute. (What fan of British comedy, à la Monty Python or Benny Hill, could deny that?) After King Æðelstan and Prince Eadmund’s West Saxon and Mercian armies defeat the Scots and Norse, the enemy troops become “werig, wiges sæd” (20a),<sup>33</sup> [weary, battle sated]. Their

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31 All Anglo-Saxon quotes from the *Andreas* are from Kenneth Brooks, *Andreas and the Fate of The Apostles* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964). I have on occasion consulted Robert Root’s translation to perfect my own. Robert Kilburn Root, *Andreas: The Legend of St. Andrew* (New York: Henry Holt and Co, 1899).

32 Johnathan Wilcox, “Eating People is Wrong: Funny Style in *Andreas* and its Analogues,” in *Anglo-Saxon Styles*, ed. Catherine E. Karkov and George Hardin Brown (Albany: SUNY Press, 2003), 212.

33 Citations from the *Battle of Brunanburg* are based on the Internet Sacred Text Archive and Robert Diamond, *Old English Grammar and Reader* (Detroit: Wayne State UP, 1970), 112–117.

leaders dead, their fellow thanes pursued by angry Mercians and West Saxons, the Norse and Scots have had their fill of fighting for the day, it seems. Nevertheless, the snark keeps flowing from our British chronicler as he points out that Olaf, leader of the Norse, and King Constantine of Scotland both choose to flee in defeat with their remaining forces (28b-39a). The narrator explains:

...~ Hreman ne þorfte  
 Meca gemanan; ~ he wæs his maga sceard,  
 Freonda gefielled ~ on folcstede  
 Beslægen æt sæcce, ~ and his sunu forlet  
 On wælstowe ~ wundum forgrunden,  
 Geongne æt guðe. (39b-44a).

[Constantine had no need to exult about those sword dealings; he was deprived of his kinsmen, friends fallen on the battle field, slain in battle, and his son, destroyed by wounds on the warground, the young man [killed] in battle].

Constantine and Olaf (and the remainder of their troops) “hliehhan ne þorfton” (47b) [had no need to laugh]. Throughout the passage litotes serve to remind the reader that the non-English forces had no need to rejoice about the battle because they had been thoroughly and embarrassingly beaten by Æðelstan and his brother. While the Scots and Norse are rudely mocked by the poet, the two English rulers return home “wiges hremige” (59b) [combat exultant].

## #6 Snarking Back to Trash-talking Demons

There can be a blurring of lines between “talking smack,” “trash talk,” and a snarky retort. The hero of the *Andreas* unleashes a word-hoard of derision on none other than the Devil himself.<sup>34</sup> One of the few acceptable moments for saints to get snarky in any time period is when they are responding to tormenting/tempting demons. Shari Horner in her “Why Do You Speak Such Foolishness: Gender Humor and Discourse in Aelfric’s *Lives of the Saints*,” finds derisive replies to demons in the legends of Saints Cecilia, Agatha, and Lucy. In *Andreas*, Satan’s minions have been frustrated in their attempts to torment St. Andrew by the miraculous appearance of the Christ’s holy cross on the face of our hero (1338). The ancient fiend then takes matters into his own hands and threatens

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<sup>34</sup> Shari Horner, “Why Do You Speak Such Foolishness: Gender Humor and Discourse in Aelfric’s *Lives of the Saints*,” in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (D.S. Brewer, 2000), 134–135.

Andrew that “þe synd witu þaes grim weotud be gewyrhtum” (1365b-1366a) [grim torments are decreed for thee] and that his warriors “to þam guðplegan gearwe sindon, / þa þe ellenweorcum” (1369–70) [will devastatingly attack him through valiant deeds]. Andrew then sets the record straight, reminding Satan of his impotence before God’s true strength:

Hwæt, me eaðe ~ ælmihtig god,  
 niða neregend, ~ se ðe in niedum iu  
 gefæstnode ~ fyrum clommum!  
 þær ðu syððan a, ~ susle gebunden,  
 in wræc wunne, ~ wuldres blunne,  
 syððan ðu forhogedes ~ heofoncyniges word.  
 þær wæs yfles or, ~ ende næfre  
 þines wræces weorðeð. ~ ðu scealt widan feorh  
 ecan þine yrmðu. ~ þe bið a symble  
 of dæge on dæg ~ drohtaþ strengra (1377–86)<sup>35</sup>

[Lo, Almighty God can with ease preserve me from enmity. Formerly, when he needed, he fastened you in fiery fetters. There you afterwards to torment were bound in wretchedness to dwell, glories forfeited, forever despised by the king of heaven’s word. Miserable was your origin; never ending your wretched existence. You shall for all eternity enlarge your wretchedness to everlasting life which grows stronger from day to day].

Understandably, the ancient fiend’s reaction to this thorough snarkdown is to turn tail and run. To appreciate the full import of this cowardly retreat, one needs to remember that the Devil had just berated his band of tormenting demons for fleeing from the symbol of Christ’s cross on Andrew’s face, and now after Satan’s moment of bravado issuing a villainous threat against Andrew, the saint turns the tables and repulses the King of Hell by merely reminding him of his feeble position in relation to God, Andrew’s lord and protector. In a dignified yet snarky affront, Andrew reminds the Devil that his hellish life situation is entirely self-inflicted, and his continued proclivity for evil only intensifies his God-given wretchedness.

## #5 Beowulf Lets the Snarks Fly with Unferth

Although I have never held with the “Marpeace” camp of interpreting Unferth as purely a “scurrilous jester,” as Norman Eliason’s contends in “The Thyle and the

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35 See note 32.



Scop in *Beowulf*,”<sup>36</sup> there are definitely a few snarks flying between him and Beowulf. Like Carol Clover, I view Unferth’s behavior as thoroughly conventional and necessary from a flyting tradition: “secure in the knowledge that Unferth will put the alien [Beowulf] through the necessary paces, Hrothgar can afford to play the gracious host.”<sup>37</sup> But whereas Unferth can be seen to unleash a minor windbag of snideness concerning Beowulf’s “ofermod” [excessive pride] in his swimming prowess, Beowulf responds with a veritable snarknado of insults and ridicule directed at Unferth and other members of the Danish court. Beowulf stipulates that he did not lose the swimming contest as Unferth implies; he was waylaid by those evil sea-beasts (mentioned in #9) whom he dispatched. After refuting the minor snark of Unferth, Beowulf unleashes a word-hoard of martially artful snark-fu, saying:

...~ No ic wiht fram the  
 swylcra searo-nitha ~ secgan hyrde,  
 billa brogan.~ Brecca naefre git  
 aet heatho-lace, ~ ne gehwaether incer,  
 swa deorlice ~ daed gefremede  
 fagum sweordum ~ -no ic thaes [fela] gylpe—  
 theah thu thinum brothrum ~ to banan wurde,  
 heafod-maegum; ~ thae thu in helle scealt  
 werhtho dreogan, ~ theah thin wit duge.  
 Secge ic þe to soðe, ~ sunu Ecglafes,  
 þæt næfre Grendel swa fela ~ gryra gefremede,  
 atol æglæca, ~ ealdre þinum,  
 hynðo on Heorote, ~ gif þin hige wære,  
 sefa swa searogrim, ~ swa þu self talast. (581b-95)<sup>38</sup>

[I have never heard a whit about you performing such daring sword play, nor about Breca either —though you are cunning. At battle play, neither of you have accomplished such deeds with hostile sword—I say this without boasting—although you to your brothers a murderer were, your closest kinsmen. And for that you will endure damnation in Hell. Although your wit is capable, I tell you truly, son of Ecglaf, Grendel would never have accomplished such terror—that loathsome monster—disgrace upon your people and Heorot, if your spirit and heart were as formidable as you consider yourself.]

Beowulf corrects Unferth’s initial account of the swimming match into a story where he not only wins but he makes the seas safer. Then, Beowulf (we are free to image him scratching his head thoughtfully, here) says he can’t quite re-

36 Norman Eliason, “The Thyle and the Scop in *Beowulf*,” *Speculum* 38.2 (April 1963): 267.

37 Carol Clover, “The Germanic Context of the Unferth Episode,” *Speculum* 55.3 (July 1980): 460.

38 See note 30.

member hearing a story anywhere near as heroic being told about Unferth (or Breca for that matter). If Unferth were so formidable, Hrothgar might not be in the position of allowing foreign warriors to cleanse Heorot of evil. Beowulf concludes this snarkdown with one final assertion—it's not that Unferth has no accomplishments; he's a clever guy, and he did kill his brothers, but the only acclaim he'll get for that is damnation. E.L. Ridsen in his discussion of "Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*," explains, "In the medieval Germanic world, formal exchanges between heroes (or among gods) may use ostensible humor to establish dominance." Additionally he posits, "In the would-be flyting scene between Beowulf and Hunferth, the poet adopts the traditional superiority ploy to set up opportunities for humor."<sup>39</sup> To validate the appropriateness of derisive snark within traditional flyting, one need only consider the exchange between our hero and Hrothgar's Thyle.

#### #4 Dramatic Snarkery: Christ Is My Boat Pilot

In an extended scene of dramatic irony which often threatens to become full-fledged ludic snark, Andrew's boat captain during his transport to the land of the Mermedonians turns out to be Christ in disguise, unbeknownst to Andrew (quite similar to the much shorter biblical account of Christ's disciples on the road to Emmaus).<sup>40</sup> Throughout their interaction Christ is questioning Andrew about Jesus and encouraging him to recount stories of the Son of God. During the first 800 lines of the 1722-line poem, two-thirds of the lines involve conversation between Andrew and Christ, where Andrew is doing the majority of the talking. Eventually Andrew spends hundreds of lines discussing Jesus's ministry on earth, and throughout much of their interaction the scene is thick with dramatic irony. Almost immediately upon Andrew's entering Christ's ship, the narrator uses phrases of attribution to call attention to the fact that Christ is the boat captain—a good example is: "Him ða ondsvarode ~ ælmihti god"<sup>41</sup> (260) [then Almighty God answered him]—leaving no doubt that, although Andrew has no clue that he is addressing Jesus, the poem's audience does. At line 308 Christ playfully rebukes Andrew with some good-natured snark for traveling without provisions or money to pay for the necessary boat travel. Christ quips:

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<sup>39</sup> E.L. Ridsen, "Heroic Humor in *Beowulf*," in *Humor in Anglo-Saxon Literature*, ed. Jonathan Wilcox (Woodbridge, UK: D.S. Brewer, 2000), 71.

<sup>40</sup> Luke 24: 13–35

<sup>41</sup> See Note 32.

Hu gewearð þe þæs, ~ wine leofesta,  
 ðæt ðu sæbeorgas ~ secan woldest,  
 merestreama gemet, ~ maðmum bedæled,  
 ofer cald cleofu ~ ceoles neosan?  
 Nafast þe to frofre ~ on faroðstræte  
 hlafes wiste ~ ne hlutterne  
 drync to dugoðe. ~ Is se drohtað strang  
 þam þe lagolade ~ lange cunnaþ (308–14)

[How comes it that you wouldst seek to travel, my agreeable friend, the sea-mountains, ocean-streams, without any treasure. To ride the ship's prow over the cold sea-chamber and not have any comfort on the path of sea; no bread and no pure drink for your people. It is a hard life to know for those who a long time journey the waterways].

Andrew (not knowing his interlocutor is Christ) sees no humor in the words spoken by the ship captain, and retorts snarkily:

Ne gedafenað þe, ~ nu þe dryhten geaf  
 welan ond wiste ~ ond woruldspede,  
 ðæt ðu ondsware ~ mid oferhygdum,  
 sece sarcwide. ~ Selre bið æghwam  
 þæt he eaðmedum ~ ellorfusne  
 oncnawe cuðlice, ~ swa þæt Crist bebead,  
 þeoden þrymfæst. (317–323a)

[It is not seemly that you answer with arrogance the lord God who bestows upon you riches, abundance, and worldly wealth. It is better to greet with humility a traveler bound to unknown lands as Christ commands, the King of Glories].

From the standpoint of dramatic irony (or snarkery), it is hard to read Christ's lines as anything other than a playful ribbing, and it's funnier yet because Andrew takes offense and attempts to correct Christ's attitude with reference to Christ's own teachings. There is snark here—even if it's only that type of snark that is recognized by the audience alone. Christ is ludicly sarcastic, and in his offended state Andrew replies with some antagonism of the snarky variety.

### #3 Wiglaf Snarks the Freeloading Cowards

Beowulf's one loyal thane indignantly upbraids the "treow-logan" (2847) [troth-breaking] cowards who flee to the safety of the woods instead of honoring their pledges to their lord. As part of the poem's nostalgic endorsement of the *comitatus*, Wiglaf serves as the sole exemplar of a good thane, while his comrades exemplify how the life of long-established peace under Beowulf's reign has made

his men soft. Wiglaf's contempt starts as slow burn which grows into a fiery snarkferno of derision and hatred. The narrator gives us the first inkling of the depths of spinelessness among Beowulf's crew:

"Nealles him on heape ~ hand gestellan  
 Æðelings bearn ~ ymbe gestodon  
 Hilde-cystum, ~ ac hy on holt bugon  
 ealdre burgan. (2596–99a) <sup>42</sup>

[Not at all did his hand-selected troops, stand near him [Beowulf], his battle-chosen warriors, but the wretches fled to the forest for safety]

and the narrator contrasts this with Wiglaf, the "leoflic lind-wiga" (2603a) [beloved shield-warrior]. Even before the death of Beowulf we see that the behavior of the cowards is going to be an important moment in the poem. Wiglaf even attempts to encourage the deserters before they disgrace themselves, proclaiming:

...~ God wat on mec  
 þæt me is micle leofre ~ þæt mine lichaman  
 mid mine gold-gyfan ~ gled fæðmie (2650b-2652).

[God knows, for me, that I much prefer that my body with my gold giver were surrounded by flames {than return home without trying to save Beowulf}].

After Beowulf's death Wiglaf's disapproval of the battle-shirkers culminates in full-on antagonistic snark. (Wiglaf's rebuke of the cowards and the *Beowulf* poet's comments upon them feature as sub-argument within John C. McGalliard's "The Poet's Comments in *Beowulf*," that Beowulf could have survived the dragon battle had the 10 deserters been "half as valiant as Wiglaf.")<sup>43</sup> Wiglaf announces to the "unleaf" (2863b) [hated ones]:

"Pat la mæg secgan ~ se ðe wyle soð specan,  
 þæt se mon-dryhten ~ se eow ða maðmas geaf  
 eored-geatwe ~ þe ge þær pn standað  
 þonne he on ealubence ~ oft gesealde  
 heal sittendum ~ helm ond byrnan  
 þeoden his þegnum ~ swylce he þrydlicost  
 ower feor oððe neah ~ findan meahte  
 þæt he genunga ~ guðgewædu  
 wraðe forwurpe ~ ða hyne wig beget.

<sup>42</sup> See note 30.

<sup>43</sup> John C. McGalliard, "The Poet's Comments in *Beowulf*," *Studies in Philology* 75.3 (1978): 269.

Nealles folc-cyning ~ fyrd gesteallum  
gylpan þorfte.” (2864–2874a)

[That, lo, a man may say who speaks the truth, that the lord that gave you those treasures, troop-arms that you stand there in, when he to those on ale-benches oft gave hall-sitters helmet and byrnie, ruler to his thanes, the best gear anywhere far or near he might find, that he completely and perversely threw away those war-weeds, when war came to him. Not at all did the folk’s king need to boast about his comrades in arms {because they were such cowards}].

Wiglaf makes clear that the honors Beowulf distributed to his thanes were wasted on unworthy men who failed to come to the aid of their liege lord when he most needed it. Moreover the shame does not just extend to the ten cowards; Wiglaf professes:

Nu sceal sincþego ~ ond swyrdgifu,  
eall eðelwyn ~ eowrum cynne,  
lufen alicgean; ~ londrihtes mot  
þære mægburge ~ monna æghwylc  
idel hweorfan, ~ syððan æðelingas  
feorran gefricgean ~ fleam eowerne,  
domleasan dæd. ~ Deað bið sella  
eorla gehwylcum ~ þonne edwitlif! (2890b-2891)

[Now shall treasure receiving and sword giving, all worldly joys to your kin, rights to own land must cease, your families will wander destitute from now on, nobles from afar will hear of your flight, your inglorious deed. Death is better for any thane than a disgraceful life!]

Wiglaf leaves no doubt about the ignominy these men and their kindred will experience. Their cowardice will be known far and wide, and they and their families will suffer for it for the foreseeable future.

## #2 Holy Snark! Flip Me Over, I’m Done on This Side

Saints’ lives have not always been accepted as repositories of Anglo-Saxon humor, but as we have moved further from envisioning every religious writer as a stoic curmudgeon suspicious of anything which could make an audience smile, there have been a number of discussions of levity in Anglo-Saxon versions of saints’ lives. Hugh Magennis points out that in some saints’ lives there is obvious “humorous incongruity” and wit, but he believes that Old English transla-

tors often played down the humor present in their sources.<sup>44</sup> Although the result is not always humor, Roberta Frank similarly finds much word play in Old English religious verse in her, “Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Verse,”<sup>45</sup> and Magennis contends, “The humor of incongruity can be seen to have a place in Old English hagiography when it operates in a tendentious way in favor of the saint.”<sup>46</sup> Aelfric of Eynsham’s “Life of Saint Lawrence” may contain one of the snarkiest comments ever attributed to a saint. Although it features in Latin versions of the story, as well, there’s no denying that Lawrence’s cooking advice to Decius and his torturer is a masterpiece of humorous derision. Decius, a Prefect of Rome, later famous for his persecution of Christians, has heard that Lawrence (a deacon of the early Church) has access to the treasures of the Church. Decius asks Lawrence to see the treasures of the Church, and Lawrence presents an assemblage of the poor and crippled Christians as the Church’s treasure. Decius is affronted by this somewhat snarky spectacle and decides to have Lawrence tortured to death on an “isenan hyrdle”<sup>47</sup> [iron grill] (224). Lawrence then makes some humorous remarks how delightful an incense his body is offering up to God saying, “Ic offrie me sylfne þam ælmihtigum gode on bræðe wynsumnysse. For þan ðe se gedrefeda gast is gode andfenge onsægednys” (201–11). [I offer myself to the Almighty as this most delightful scent. For then this tortured soul is to God an acceptable sacrifice]. St. Lawrence eventually seasons his language with this little snarklet: “Efne þu earming bræddeð ænne dæl mines lichaman; wende nu þon oþerne, 7 et.” [Indeed wretch, you have cooked one part of my body, now turn it over on the other, and then eat]. As with many martyrs, Lawrence’s torture has not gone as smoothly as was hoped for by the disgruntled pagans, and his cooking recommendations can quite easily be read as snark directed at his hapless torturers.

## #1 Byrhtnoth Gets His Snark On

In “The Battle of Maldon” our man Byrhtnoth lays a mighty snarkdown on a truly “ofermod” Viking messenger. Sure, the English lose, sure, Byrhtnoth dies after receiving multiple wounds, but he wins the verbal combat, in this translator’s

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<sup>44</sup> Magennis, “Funny Thing Happened,” 144.

<sup>45</sup> Roberta Frank, “Some Uses of Paronomasia in Old English Scriptural Verse,” *Speculum* 47.2 (April 1972): 207–226.

<sup>46</sup> Magennis, “Funny Thing Happened,” 146.

<sup>47</sup> All Anglo-Saxon quotes from Aelfric’s *Lives of the Saints* are from Peter Clemoes’s edition of *Aelfric’s Catholic Homilies*.

opinion. After enduring the threats and proposed extortion from the Vikings' "Brim-manna boda"<sup>48</sup> (49) [uppity spokesman], Byrhtnoth verbally assaults the seaman with:

Gehyrst þu, sælida, ~ hwæt þis folc segeð?  
 Hi willað eow to gafole ~ garas syllan,  
 ættrynne ord ~ and ealde swurd,  
 þa heregeatu ~ þe eow æt hilde ne deah. (45–48)

[Do you hear, seafarer, what these people say? They will render you spears as tribute, poisonous spearpoint and ancient swords; that battle gear will be no good for you in this battle.]

The messenger demands tribute to leave Byrhtnoth and his villagers unscathed, but Byrhtnoth retorts:

...~ To heanlic me þinceð  
 þæt ge mid urum ~ sceattum to scype gangon  
 unbefohtene, ~ nu ge þus feor hider  
 on urne ~ eard in becomon. (55b-59)

[I think it would be ignoble that you would go to your ships with our treasure without a fight; now that you have so far into our country come.]

If the above translation has left anything in doubt, based upon the larger context of the verbal exchange—the Snark-O-Vision™ version of what Byrhtnoth is saying is: “You want some tribute? We got your tribute right here! We will pay it in spears and swords delivered directly to your bodies. Now that you traveled so far into our country, it would be a shame if you left without the fight you came for!” Although our translations differ slightly, Bradley Ryner, within his discussion of how Byrhtnoth manipulates expected subject and object positions during his response to the Viking’s extortion, offers an interpretation completely consonant with my own. Ryner asserts that the exchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking messenger is not a traditional flyting; he contends that Byrhtnoth’s boasts never reach the “rhetorical excesses”<sup>49</sup> necessary for flyting, but I find myself more in agreement with N.F. Blake and Ward Parks,<sup>50</sup> who both accept that the interchange between Byrhtnoth and the Viking is indeed

<sup>48</sup> I have consulted Robert Diamond’s handbook and the Internet Sacred Text Archive for the Anglo-Saxon of *The Battle of Maldon*.

<sup>49</sup> Bradley D. Ryner, “Exchanging Battle: Subjective and Objective Conflicts in the *Battle of Maldon*,” *English Studies* 87.3 (2006): 266.

<sup>50</sup> N.F. Blake, “The Flyting in the Battle of Maldon,” *English Language Notes* 13 (1976): 242–244; Ward Parks, “The Flyting Speech in Heroic Narrative,” *Neophilologus* 71 (April 1987): 285–295.

a traditional Germanic flyting. Either way, Byrhtnoth's attempt to derisively push back against the Viking aggression and his modification to the means of payment (and its delivery) seem like the quintessential moment of Anglo-Saxon snark.

## Fit the Last: Concluding Your Snarxpedition

We have traveled the wilderness of Anglo-Saxon texts together, and only you can count the number of snarks we have encountered. Perhaps some I pointed out disappeared as I attempted their translation, in the manner of Lewis Carroll's boojum snark. We've survived snarky riddlers, sardonic saints, ludicly ironic gods, tendentious demons, and trash-talking warriors. Like conscientious and socially conscious travelers, we have attempted to understand these creatures while leaving them as unmolested by our observation process as possible. Some of you may still feel like snark is a more 21<sup>st</sup>-century genre than a regular feature of Anglo-Saxon interactions, but perhaps you can appreciate how one might reasonably accept that snark has been with us since, at least, the earliest writings in English. For this commentator/translator, it seems clear that the often harsh and violent content of Anglo-Saxon poetry provides a suitable environment to encounter a considerable number of snarks. In their often pessimistic employment of litotes to create darkly humorous moments and their interest in responding to an opponent's taunts with flytingesque retorts, there is good reason to find Anglo-Saxon warriors, both secular and saintly, as eminently capable of laying some snark down to defend their honor, their kingdom, and their God.



# Christopher Abram

## Trolling in Old Norse

### Ambiguity and Incitement in *Sneglu-Halla þáttir*

*Tröll* is a word used to denote various types of more or less supernatural, and more or less malignant, monsters in Old Norse-Icelandic literature—everything from fire-breathing dragons to undead revenants.<sup>1</sup> It is, of course, the origin of the English noun “troll.”<sup>2</sup> The hero of the thirteenth-century Icelandic tale *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is no *tröll* in the primary sense of the term, but he displays many attributes that have become, over time, associated with trollishness—especially as it is now manifested in internet culture.

The plot of *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is soon summarized: an Icelandic poet, Halli, visits the Norwegian king Haraldr Sigurðarson harðráði (“hard ruler”), who reigned from 1046 to 1066, and engages in a series of blistering verbal exchanges with the king and his rivals at court. The antagonists hurl insults at each other and use all sorts of duplicitous conversational stratagems to demonstrate the superiority of their wit and their superiority through wit.<sup>3</sup> A courtly setting is commonplace in the *þættir* (singular *þáttir*, meaning “strand,” though the term is often translated as “tale”), as is the basic structure of an Icelander’s journey abroad to test himself beyond the limits of his own community. The Icelandic protagonist normally overcomes all obstacles—including those placed in his way by corrupt and venal foreigners—and returns home with wealth and prestige enhanced. A number of praiseworthy behaviors are displayed by the heroes of *þættir*: some owe their success to honesty, generosity, or to Christian piety; some to understanding or manipulating the conventions of the court; some sim-

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1 For an excellent and comprehensive survey of Nordic troll-traditions, see John Lindow, *Trolls: An Unnatural History* (London: Reaktion, 2014).

2 For an exhaustive history of trolls in Nordic, Germanic, and English folklore and literature, see Martin Arnold, “Hvat er tröll nema þat?: The Cultural History of the Troll,” in *The Shadow-Walkers: Jacob Grimm’s Mythology of the Monstrous*, ed. Tom Shippey, Arizona Studies in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance 14 (Tempe, AZ: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2005), 111-55.

3 It is probable that a historical Halli did serve Haraldr as a court poet: at least he is listed in that role in the thirteenth-century catalog of Norse poets known as *Skáldatal*, which circulated in manuscripts of *Snorra Edda* and the collection of kings’ sagas known as *Heimskringla*: see *The Uppsala Edda: DG 11 4to*, ed. Heimir Pálsson and translated by Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2012), 104 and lxxv-lxxvii.

ply to their pluck and perseverance.<sup>4</sup> As Joseph Harris notes, however, *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* is “much more than any other [þáttir] predicated on the value of wit.”<sup>5</sup> The wit on display includes facility in poetic composition, improvisation and quick thinking, insults and invective, irony and sarcasm: the most prized ability in this narrative is to have the last word, to talk one’s opponent into the ground, to have always to hand the *mot juste*, the perfectly cutting riposte, the insult or accusation for which one’s interlocutor has no reply. Words are both the motor of conflict and the means by which conflict may be avoided or resolved. While wordplay and swordplay often go hand in hand in the world of the Icelandic sagas, *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* contains not one violent death.

*Sneglu-Halla þáttir* survives in two versions represented by the fourteenth-century manuscript Flateyjarbók (Copenhagen, Royal Library, GkS 1005 fol., cited here as F) and the thirteenth-century Morkinskinna (Copenhagen, Royal Library, GkS 1009 fol., cited as M). When we are first introduced to Halli in Flateyjarbók, he is described as “skáld gott ok orðgreppr mikill [a good poet and a great word-poet-monster]” (F 264).<sup>6</sup> *Greppr* is a synonym for “poet,” but it is also attested as a monster-word,<sup>7</sup> and the tension of the double meaning works well in the *þáttir*’s description of a character whose skill with words is always troublesome and at times might be called trollish. Halli is also called *orðhákr mikill* (F 265): “a great word-shark,” in Cleasby-Vigfusson’s vivid and felicitous gloss; and *orðhvass* (F 278): “word-sharp,” a term that George Clark translates as “sarcastic,” though that gloss is overly specific about the nature of Halli’s wit.<sup>8</sup> Halli’s epithet, *sneгла*, does not mean “sarcastic,” as Clark’s calling the *þáttir* “The Tale of Sarcastic Halli” implies: it connotes a person who is

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<sup>4</sup> The best introduction to the literary characteristics of this corpus remain two articles from the Seventies by Joseph Harris: “Genre and Narrative Structure in Some *Íslendinga þættir*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 44 (1972), 1–27, and “*Íslendinga þættir*: Theme and Genre,” *Scandinavian Studies* 48 (1976), 1–28. See also Ármann Jakobsson, “The Life and Death of the Medieval Icelandic Short Story,” *JEGP* 112 (2013), 257–91.

<sup>5</sup> Harris, “*Íslendinga þættir*: Theme and Genre,” 8–9.

<sup>6</sup> All citations from *Sneglu-Halla þáttir* are taken from *Eyrfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, Íslenzk fornrit 9 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenska fornritafélag, 1956), 263–95. Jónas presents the two versions side-by-side, and I shall cite them henceforth parenthetically in the main text by version and page number in the edition.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Cleasby and Gudbrand Vigfusson, *An Icelandic-English Dictionary*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1957), s.v. *greppr*. Both senses of *greppr* probably originate in the idea of a brave or warlike man, as in the related word *garpr*.

<sup>8</sup> I cite this translation from “The Tale of Sarcastic Halli,” trans. George Clark, in *The Sagas of Icelanders: A Selection*, ed. Örnólfur Þorsson (New York: Viking Adult, 2000), 694–712, here at 694. Unless otherwise noted, however, all translations given in this article are my own.

unruly, stubborn, unusually agile, or perhaps just skinny.<sup>9</sup> Sarcasm, as we will see, is a key weapon in Halli's armory, but only one among many.

Halli's "word-sharpness" is his defining feature. It is multifaceted and represented in the narrative as simultaneously problematic and praiseworthy. Its foundations lie in three key areas: ambiguity, incitement, and affect. Halli does not always (or even often) say what he means, though he means what he says; his ambiguous speech is designed to incite a tangible response from his hearer, as well as to produce affect—normally to make the hearer feel worse, or look worse to others. As a sower of discord, Halli resembles both classical figures like Eris and the Nordic trickster-god Loki. But I propose that a peculiarly compelling comparison to Halli's "wordsharpness" is to be found in modern concepts of trolls and trolling, in the sense of "one who causes trouble in online discussions" and "to cause trouble in online discussions." Though the medium of these verbal interactions differs, there are sufficient similarities between the two phenomena for us to posit that the verbal sparring in which Halli and his antagonists constantly engage is a form of trolling *avant la lettre*.

The internet troll is a relatively recent addition to our imagination's bestiary. It was unrecorded until 1992 or thereabouts; before then, the nascent realm of cyberspace lacked these monsters—or else lacked a word to denote them. In a draft addition to its entry for the first sense of the noun "troll," the *OED* records a posting to the alt.folklore.urban Usenet newsgroup, dated 14 December 1992, as the earliest known occurrence of this term.<sup>10</sup> It is the first sighting (as well as the first citing) of a new imaginary being by explorers in a new and fantastical environment, though the casualness with which the term was dropped into the alt.folklore.urban discussion suggests it was already well known in that environment.<sup>11</sup>

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9 The most likely meanings of *sneгла* are "weaver's shuttle" or "unruly sheep"/"hardy (but stubborn) livestock." See *Eyfirðinga sögur*, ed. Jónas Kristjánsson, 263, n. 1. On the etymology of *sneгла*, see Jesse Byock, *Viking Age Iceland* (London: Penguin, 2001), 229; Jan de Vries, *Altnordisches etymologisches Wörterbuch* (Leiden: Brill, 1977), s.v. De Vries also offers a Norwegian cognate that means "skinny"/"weak", which accords with Halli's physical description in the *páttr*. Merrill Kaplan (personal communication) suggests that the connection between shuttle and sheep arises from a visual comparison: the unruly animal darts, shuttle-like, in and out and between the legs of the shepherds who try to take hold of it.

10 2006 draft addition to "troll, n.1". *OED Online*, June 2015. The citation from alt.folklore.urban reads: "If I didn't know better I would swear that this post bears the mark of the inevitable Peter van der Linden in troll mode."

11 As Whitney Phillips points out: *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things: Mapping the Relationship between Online Trolling and Mainstream Culture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015), 15–16.

The internet troll is a beast of a divided nature. Its identity partakes of two etymologically distinct notions of trolls and trolling. Initially, to be a troll online was a question of doing: the idea of trolling as an activity is borrowed from the terminology of fishing.<sup>12</sup> One trolls for fish by trailing a baited hook on a line behind a slowly moving boat. The goal of the exercise is to catch something. In its classic form, internet trolling seeks to lure uninitiated participants in a group's online communications into reactions that reveal their naivety and ignorance of the community's codes; trolling produces amusement for established members of the group at the expense of "newbies." It is a way of reinforcing social bonds between initiated participants and can serve as a *rite de passage* for aspirant members of the community.<sup>13</sup> Typically, trolling of this type has involved the straight-faced repetition of erroneous facts or controversial opinions that the initiated recognize as jokes but the uninitiated outsider, in search of social status or acknowledgement from the community, will rush in to correct. There will often be an element of absurdity, or at least exaggeration, to these claims: the more outrageous the proposition that can attract a serious, preferably indignant response, the more successful the trolling. Because they are familiar with the history and disposition of the community, its codes and in-jokes, established members will recognize the trolling post for what it is, and either ignore it or put their tongues in their cheeks and extend or elaborate the joke by adding new layers of misinformation to the original claim.

The second aspect of the internet troll's identity is connected with the unrelated noun "troll"—the creature from Scandinavian folklore that we have already encountered.<sup>14</sup> The common online cry of "don't feed the troll!" in response to an act of trolling addresses this second aspect of internet trollishness: a troll is not merely one who trolls, but also one who displays this type of monstrous malevolency.<sup>15</sup> The troll has moved from being a patient, if mischievous, angler to a ravenous beast which feeds on and gains strength from its victims' pain or embarrassment.

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<sup>12</sup> Michele Tepper, "Usenet Communities and the Cultural Politics of Information," in *Internet Culture*, ed. David Porter (New York: Routledge, 1997), 39–54, at 40.

<sup>13</sup> Jonathan Bishop, "Representations of 'Trolls' in Mass Media Communication: A Review of Media-Texts and Moral Panics relating to 'Internet Trolling'," *International Journal of Web Based Communities* 10 (2014), 7–24, at 9.

<sup>14</sup> Tepper, "Usenet Communities," 42; David Crystal, *Language and the Internet*, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 56. In modern Icelandic, the notion of trolling on the internet is expressed by the neologisms *pursa* or *pursast* (to *purs*/to make oneself a *purs*). A *purs* is another Old Norse mythological creature, akin to an ogre or giant. Both *purs* and *tröll* are used for "internet troll" as a noun.

<sup>15</sup> See also Lindow, *Trolls*, 140–43.

Monstrous trolls can fulfill gate-keeping functions—we only have to think of the story of the Three Billy Goats Gruff—but the second half of the internet troll’s identity can easily shade into simple abusiveness for its own sake. Beyond enforcing community boundaries and asserting group identity, the concept of online trolling now encompasses acts of harassment and intimidation. Jonathan Bishop calls the latter mode of behavior “anonymous trolling” and contrasts it with what he calls “classical” trolling: “Classical trolling can be seen to be done for the community’s consensual entertainment in order to build bonds between users. Anonymous trolling on the other hand can be seen to be done at the expense of someone outside of a particular community for that person’s own sick enjoyment, or to share with others who are part of a ‘clubhouse’ that encourages trolling. These trolls thus do it for their own enjoyment, even if there is a victim who has no benefit from it.”<sup>16</sup> Although most online trolling is performed anonymously or pseudonymously, in Bishop’s classification “classical” trolling can be performed effectively by members of the community *in propria persona*. Purely abusive trolling, on the other hand, relies on the anonymity of the medium to shield the troll from others responding to abuse in kind or reporting it to authority. A depressingly common form of “anonymous trolling” is for detractors to populate the online media presence of someone who has died, posting scurrilous or offensive assessments of the deceased and gaining pleasure from the community’s outraged reactions. This mode of trolling combines the wanton cruelty of the monstrous troll with the desire to provoke a certain response that has been the hallmark of “classical” trolling.

The two forms of trolling are no longer absolutely distinguishable, if they ever were. Any form of abusive online discourse can now be called trolling; any unpleasant or obstreperous participant in an online community tends to get labeled a troll—or to self-identify as a troll: as Whitney Phillips notes, trolling has developed into a subculture, in which the participants are “marked by a set of unifying linguistic and behavioral practices.”<sup>17</sup>

Since my concern in this essay is not with contemporary online subcultures, however, it is not sufficient for my purposes simply to state that trolling is what trolls do or to equate trolling with abusiveness. It is possible to be abusive without trolling, and it is possible to be a non-abusive troll. The troll/trolling complex seems to have three definitive features that separate it from other forms of inter-

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<sup>16</sup> Bishop, “Representations of ‘Trolls,’” 9. This type of abusive behavior has more normally been called “flaming,” though, as Bishop points out, the two concepts appear to be merging under the term “trolling,” which is used regularly to refer to any sort of antisocial discourse online.

<sup>17</sup> Phillips, *This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, 17.

action, pragmatically speaking. These features are related to sarcasm and other ironical modes, but they are specific to the novel communicative context that has produced them.

1. The troll (the speaker of the utterance) has no personal relationship with the victim (recipient of the utterance). The online medium removes the normal verbal and physical cues that might allow the recipient to assess the speaker's intentions in a face-to-face conversation.

2. A trolling statement is always disingenuous: the troll's utterance may or may not be true from one or more perspectives, but it is always insincere when expressed in this context. To call Tony Blair the greatest British prime minister in history is a matter of opinion—in certain circles it might be regarded as a factual statement. But to address such an opinion to a group in which Blair is held in low esteem may be considered trolling, whether or not the speaker really believes it to be true. The disconnect between participants in the interaction, often accompanied by the troll's anonymity, enables such ambiguity.<sup>18</sup> Abusive trolling is also typically insincere on the part of the speaker: the real feelings of the troll about, for instance, a dead celebrity are extrinsic to the troll's representation of a highly negative viewpoint on the subject. (A further sub-variety of trolling, so-called "concern trolling," trades on a different sort of insincerity: a troll may simulate a degree of concern about a person that actually encodes disapproval or disdain for them.)<sup>19</sup>

3. The goal of trolling is affective, and its success determined by the recipient's reaction to it. In "classical" trolling, the speaker attempts to get the recipient to reveal his or her ignorance or naivety within the social context of that particular environment. An abusive, "anonymous" troll aims to provoke negative feelings in the recipient. Both forms of trolling result in the victim of the trolling losing "face," as that term has been used in pragmatic linguistics: "the public self-image that every member (of a society) wants to claim for himself," in the formulation of Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson.<sup>20</sup> The preservation of

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**18** See Judith Donath, "Identity and Deception in the Virtual World," in *Communities in Cyberspace*, ed. Mark A. Smith and Peter Kollock (New York: Routledge, 1999), 29–60.

**19** Jonathan Bishop, "Trolling for the Lulz? Using Media Theory to Understand Transgressive Humour and Other Internet Trolling in Online Communities," in *Transforming Politics and Policy in the Digital Age*, ed. Bishop (Hershey, PA: IGI Global, 2014), 155–73, at 164.

**20** Penelope Brown and Stephen Levinson, *Politeness. Some Universals in Language Usage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 61.

face lies behind many conceptions of politeness: trolling is an impolite form of interaction *par excellence*.<sup>21</sup>

Like sarcasm and irony, trolling is an “off-the-record” communicative act in Brown and Levinson’s terms.<sup>22</sup> As Ben Slugoski and William Turnbull define it, “A communicative act that is done off the record is one that has more than one defensible interpretation, and as such leaves the speaker free from responsibility by leaving it up to the recipient to decide how to interpret it. By encoding an insult indirectly as a compliment, the speaker may deny the offensive intent of the remark and thus guard against the escalation of hostilities that would arise from directly insulting the recipient.”<sup>23</sup>

Trolling is doubly “off-the-record,” however, by dint of the medium’s distancing and dehumanizing effects, especially when participants in this discourse do not know each other in real life. Slugoski and Turnbull also note that social encounters, in which the goal of both participants is normally to preserve “face,” depend for their smooth and successful operation upon “knowledge of social structure and social relationships between the speaker and the hearer.”<sup>24</sup> Classical trolling exploits the lack of such knowledge on the part of newbies, while abusive trolling takes advantage of anonymity to flout the communicative norms that would be expected to apply in face-to-face interactions.<sup>25</sup> The person who is taken in by a trolling statement, who responds to it as if it were an ingenuous statement of fact or another’s honestly-held opinion, loses face in the virtual community where the interaction takes place. The troll may gain “face”—increase his or her cultural capital in the group, to put it another way—at the expense of his or her victim, but it is important to remember that the main goal of much trolling, especially in its post-classical flavors, is simply amusement for the troll and anybody who takes pleasure in seeing others irritated, discomfited, or made to look foolish.

The eponymous hero of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* is, by these standards, a troll of the modern sort. The plot of the *þáttr* consists of little more than a series of verbal exchanges between the Icelander Halli and the people he encounters at the court of King Haraldr. Haraldr is himself an extremely sharp-witted man whose taste in humor tends towards the biting and offensive. The Flateyjarbók text of

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21 See Shiv R. Upadhyay, “Identity and Impoliteness in Computer-Mediated Reader Responses,” *Journal of Politeness Research: Language, Behaviour, Culture* 6 (2010), 105–27.

22 Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 69.

23 Ben Slugoski and William Turnbull, “Cruel to be Kind and Kind to be Cruel: Sarcasm, Banter, and Social Relations,” *Journal of Language and Social Psychology* 7 (1988), 101–21, at 105.

24 Slugoski and Turnbull, “Cruel to be Kind,” 102.

25 Phillips, *This is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things*, 25.

the *þáttir* focuses particular attention on the king's wit by introducing him at the start, in contrast to the Morkinskinna version which introduces Halli first:

Svá er sagt, at Haraldr konungr var allra manna vitrastr og ráðgastr; varð þat ok flest at ráði, er hann lagði til. Hann var skáld gott. Jafnan kastaði hann háðyrðum at þeim mǫnnum, er honum sýndisk; þolði hann ok allra manna bezt, þótt at honum væri kastat klámyrðum, þá er honum var gott í skapi. (F 263)

[It is said that King Haraldr was the wisest and shrewdest of people; most things turned out as he planned. He was a good poet. He always hurled insults at people when he felt so inclined, and he put up with it better than anyone when insults were thrown in his direction, as long as he was in a good mood.]

Following this introductory sketch, Haraldr's first involvement in the narrative amply supports the *þáttir*'s description of his fondness for badinage and his willingness to accept mockery in exchange for mockery.

When Sneglu-Halli and his companions' ship arrives in Norway, they encounter three impressive longships. From one of these, a strikingly-dressed man challenges the newcomers, asking “Hverr stýrir skipinu, eða hvar váru þér (í vetr), eða hvar tóku þér fyrst land, eða hvar lágu þér í nótt?” [“Who captains the ship? Where were you over the winter? Where did you first land, and where did you spend the night?”] (F264). These questions are perfectly appropriate to their context; the speaker is playing the role of watchman by the book. There is no suggestion that his questions are disingenuous or asked in bad faith. Deciding to speak on behalf of his shipmates, who are dumbfounded by this torrent of interrogation, Halli does not give any indication of sarcasm when he replies “Vér várum í vetr á Íslandi, en ýttum af Gásum, en Bárðr heitir stýrimaðr, en tókum land við Hítrar, en lágum í nótt við Agðanes” [“We were in Iceland for the winter, and set out from Gásir, and Bárðr is our captain's name. We made our landfall at Hítra, but we lay for the night off Agðanes”] (F 264–65).<sup>26</sup> The interaction to this point is utterly polite: information is solicited and provided in a respectful and appropriate register.

And then the tone of the piece changes quite abruptly. Flateyjarbók reveals to the reader that the questioner was really King Haraldr—the folktale motif of “the king in disguise” is popular in the *þættir*<sup>27</sup>—although Halli needs no telling;

<sup>26</sup> The Morkinskinna text has *várum í nótt við Agðanes* (“were in Agðanes for the night”) where Flateyjarbók reads *lágum* (“lay”). The use of a potential *double entendre* in Flateyjarbók—“we lay all night against Agði's promontory”—could be a trigger for the king's subsequent, and rather more explicit, sexual humor.

<sup>27</sup> See Joseph Harris, “The King in Disguise: An International Popular Tale in Two Old Icelandic Adaptations,” *Arkiv för nordisk filologi* 94 (1979), 57–81.



the Morkinskinna version only removes the speaker's anonymity after the next set of questions and answers have been given.

Pessi maðr spurði, er reyndar var Haraldr konungr Sigurðarson: “Sarð hann yðr eigi Agði?” “Eigi enna,” segir Halli.

Konungurrinn brosti at ok mælti: “Er nokkur til ráðs um, at hann muni enn síðar meir veita yðr þessa þjónustu?”

“Ekki,” sagði hann Halli, “ok bar þó einn hlutr þar mest til þess, er vér fórum enga skömm af honum.”

“Hvat var þat?” segir konungr. Halli vissi gørla, við hvern hann talaði.

“Þat, herra,” segir hann, “ef yðr forvitnar at vita, at hann Agði beið at þessu oss tignari manna ok vætti yðvar þangat í kveld, ok mun hann þá gjalda af höndum þessa skuld ótæpt.”

“Þú munt vera orðhákr mikill,” segir konungr. (F 265)

[This man asked, who proved to be King Haraldr Sigurðarson: “Didn’t Agði fuck you?” “Not yet,” says Halli.

The king smiled and said: “Is there any plan that he should offer you this service later on?”

“No,” said Halli, “and one thing in particular ensured that we received no such shame from him.”

“What was that?” says the king. Halli knew full well whom he was talking to.

“Because, Sire,” he says, “if you are curious to know, Agði was waiting for nobler men than us. He expects you there in the evening, and he will discharge this obligation unstintingly.”

“You must be a great word-shark,” says the king.]

This is the *þátttr*’s first example of a behavior that bears some of the hallmarks of modern-day trolling, though the troll (here, Haraldr) fails to produce a reaction in his victim (Halli) that causes the victim to lose face. Indeed, Halli comes out of the exchange with his reputation enhanced by turning the trolling statement back on its author.

Haraldr’s trolling fails to land its fish because of Halli’s perspicacity. While the king seems to be in a position to exploit his anonymity by speaking in a register that is completely incongruous with his position in the community, Halli is at once aware of the identity of his interlocutor. He is able, when he throws Haraldr’s insinuation back at him, to preempt a strongly negative reaction by speaking in terms that are polite and ambiguous—calling Haraldr by the honorific *herra* and not spelling out the implied treatment that Agði had in store for him—as opposed to coarse and explicit. It is the incongruity of the shockingly impolite phrase *Sarð hann yðr eigi Agði?* (“Didn’t Agði fuck you?”) in the mouth of a high-status person who, a moment earlier, had been observing the conversational norms expected in such an encounter, which is designed to produce a reaction in Halli. Presumably, though the *þátttr* does not mention them, the king’s companions would also be expected to get a laugh out of their

boss's trolling the Icelandic "newbies" who had washed up into their territory. By making the outsiders the butt of an outrageous joke, the king reinforces the boundaries of his own group's identity and performs an act of gate-keeping. Haraldr's question is thus in some sense an initiatory challenge, which here resembles salient features of both "classical" and "anonymous" trolling: the desire to cause embarrassment to a greenhorn by revealing their ignorance of social codes of the former and the transgressive humor of the latter.<sup>28</sup>

But Halli manages to turn the tables on the king by matching, or exceeding him, in "word-sharpness." He is able to recognize trolling and to respond in kind, turning a face-threatening interaction into one in which he gains face at the king's expense. The trolled becomes the troll. It is important to remember, however, that Haraldr's reaction to what should have been an extremely risky speech act—implying that the king was the passive partner in sodomy falls far short of expected standards of politeness, even among Vikings—has been prefigured by Flateyjarbók's mention of his ability to take insults as well as to give them. Since Halli is able to recognize Haraldr, he presumably knows something of what he is up against when he engages the king in this verbal combat. At any rate, if Haraldr has sought to test Halli in this opening exchange, Halli has passed the test: the king accepts Halli, who moves into the new communicative context of the royal court, which his success in deflecting the king's trolling proves him fit to join.

From this point on, Halli aspires to gain face and prestige at Haraldr's court by composing poetry in his honor—if possible, he wants to become the king's *hofuðskáld* (chief poet), a post occupied by Þjóðólfr Arnórsson, another Icelandic long established in Norway. It was a position of particular eminence under Haraldr, who employed thirteen skálds, composed poetry himself, and seems, according to a wide range of sources, to have been a sophisticated and appreciative connoisseur of other people's verse.<sup>29</sup>

The path to becoming a chieftain's *hofuðskáld*, while by no means easy, follows a standard trajectory in this type of narrative. It is imperative, of course, for the poet to curry favor with his employer: as Diana Whaley puts it, "Laudatory poetry addressed to rulers in the Scandinavian homelands can secure favour, reward and lasting fame for its makers, and can even save lives, if sycophantic

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<sup>28</sup> Bishop, "Representations of 'Trolls'," 9.

<sup>29</sup> Gabriel Turville-Petre, *Haraldr the Hard-Ruler and his Poets. The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College London, 1 December 1966* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1968), 5.

enough.”<sup>30</sup> But the aspirant skáld must also defeat the incumbent holder of the position, either through enhancing his own prestige and that of his poetry or else undermining his rival in some way. Court poetry was not merely a privileged art form; it was a tangible and fully negotiable type of cultural capital that could—indeed had to—be converted into other forms of symbolic capital and/or material goods.<sup>31</sup> In this environment, a poem almost always met with a response, whether payment, praise or opprobrium, or simply an answering poem.

While a considerable amount of flattery was politic in composing verse in honor of one’s king, there were also pressures acting against excessive inflation of the ruler’s reputation. Writing in the thirteenth century, Snorri Sturluson famously asserted the evidentiary value of court poetry on the grounds that, if flattery were pushed to the point of fabricating the subject’s noble deeds, it would be too easily seen through by contemporaries:

En þat er hátt skálda, at lofa þann mest, er þá eru þeir fyrir, en engi myndi þat þora at segja sjálfum honum þau verk hans, er allir þeir, er heyrði, vissi, at hégómi væri ok skrök, ok svá sjálfr hann; þat væri þá háð, en eigi lof.<sup>32</sup>

[It is indeed the habit of poets to praise most highly the one in whose presence they are at the time, but no one would dare to tell him to his face about deeds of his which all who listened, as well as the man himself, knew were falsehoods and fictions. That would be mockery and not praise.]<sup>33</sup>

Because praise poetry was composed and delivered in, by, and for a close-knit community that had access to both knowledge of events and their artistic mediation, it seems reasonable to expect that the content of verses produced in this context would be policed, in order to ensure that praise, and not mockery, was what poets delivered.

In *Sneglu-Halla þátt*’s version of Haraldr harðráði’s court, however, mockery, deception, ambiguity, and antagonism are rife in the poets’ compositions. Nobody is more enthusiastic about lampoons, satires, and what he at one

<sup>30</sup> Diana Whaley, “Representations of the Skalds in the Sagas 1: Social and Professional Relations,” in *Skaldsagas: Text, Vocation, and Desire in the Icelandic Sagas of Poets*, ed. Russel Poole, Reallexikon der germanischen Altertumskunde, Ergänzungsbände 27 (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2000), 285–308, at 287.

<sup>31</sup> See Kevin Wanner, *Snorri Sturluson and the Edda: The Conversion of Cultural Capital in Medieval Scandinavia* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008), especially chs. 3 and 4.

<sup>32</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla*, ed. Bjarni Aðalbjarnarson, 3 vols., Íslenzk fornrit 26–28 (Reykjavík: Hið íslenzka fornritafélag, 1941–51), I, 5

<sup>33</sup> Snorri Sturluson, *Heimskringla. Volume I: The Beginnings to Óláfr Tryggvason*, trans. Alison Finlay and Anthony Faulkes (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 2011), 4.

point calls *tvíræðisorð* (F 294), which Clark translates as “ambiguous statements,” and which breaks down into the component elements “two-meaning-word(s),”<sup>34</sup> than the king himself. The circumstances surrounding the first act of poetic composition in the *páttr* reveal that Haraldr’s whims are chiefly responsible for determining what sort of poetry was appropriate in a given circumstance. Walking in the street with his entourage, Haraldr notices a tanner and a blacksmith arguing. He at once commands Þjóðólfr to compose a poem about the tradesmen’s spat. Þjóðólfr demurs, on the grounds that such a subject is hardly suitable for one with the title of *hofuðskáld* to a king. But Haraldr insists that Þjóðólfr elevate the humdrum vignette into the poetic realm by exploiting the potential for verse to bear multiple meanings: “Konungr svarar: ‘Þetta er meiri vandi en þú munt ætla; þú skalt gera af þeim alla men aðra en þeir eru; lát annan vera Sigurð Fáfnisbana, en annan Fáfni, ok kenn þó hvárn til sinnar iðnar’” [The king answers: “It’s more difficult than you think; you must turn them into entirely different people than they are. Let one be Sigurð Fáfnisbani, and the other Fáfnir, but nonetheless make each known by his trade”] (F 267). Þjóðólfr rises to the challenge, and composes a stanza in which the blacksmith becomes the *Sigurðr sleggju* (“Sigurðr of the hammer”) and the tanner turns into the legendary dragon, Fáfnir. The king then makes him do the same again, but this time metamorphosing the combatants into the god Þórr and his famous mythological enemy, the giant Geirrøðr.<sup>35</sup> The king threatens to cause Þjóðólfr a loss of face by making him work with material that is beneath his dignity—but by allowing him to splice legendary and mythological material into his verses, material which is at the heart of the skaldic tradition, Haraldr introduces just enough ambiguity into the challenge to allow Þjóðólfr to escape from the situation with some dignity. (Refusing the king’s commission would have been a bad career move, to say the least.)

It is doubtful whether Þjóðólfr’s reputation survives this episode quite unscathed, however. Although he demonstrates quick wits and cleverness in turning the dross of proletarian life into the gold of high-toned poetry, Haraldr has forced him into this act of artistic slumming that feels incompatible with the chief poet’s eminence at court. Part of the king’s pleasure in demanding such an unusual composition is surely a desire to discomfit the poet, to test him, and to see what reaction his capricious demand will elicit. In the end, the king seems satisfied with how Þjóðólfr has handled the challenge: “‘Ekki ertu

<sup>34</sup> The neuter noun *orð* has identical singular and plural forms in the accusative, but in this instance it is modified by the pronoun *nokkur* (“some”), which can only be plural.

<sup>35</sup> In *Morkinskinna*, the order of the stanzas is reversed, with the Þórr-verse preceding the Sigurðr-verse. In other respects the versions of this episode are identical.

mælir um þat,’ sagði konungr, ‘at þú ert órleysingr til skáldskapar.” [“It’s not said about you,” said the king, “that you are overpraised for your poetry”] (F 268–69). This on-the-record endorsement of Þjóðólfr’s prowess is sufficient to assuage his suspicion that the king is mocking him, although this reading certainly makes Haraldr’s praise less categorical than that of the Morkinskinna text, where Haraldr simply says “Gott skáld ertu, Þjóðólfr” [“You are a good poet, Þjóðólfr”] (M 268) and rewards him with a gold ring, a tangible symbol of esteem that cannot be interpreted as an ironical act. In Morkinskinna, only the king’s reaction is recorded, while in Flateyjarbók the episode concludes only when Haraldr’s followers have taken his lead and applauded the compositions. The men, at least, have been convinced that Haraldr’s praise of Þjóðólfr is not mockery.

But when the Norwegians taunt Halli with reports of his rival’s achievements, claiming that Halli would never be able to rise to such heights—which we could well view as a sort of trolling, since it is a subjective viewpoint stated as fact in order to produce a negative reaction, and loss of face, in someone who is not a member of the in-group—he gives a response that drips with sarcasm:

Ok um kveldit, er menn sátu við drykk, kváðu þeir fyrir Halla ok sögðu hann eigi mundu svá yrkja, þótt hann þœttisk skáld mikit. Halli kvezk víta, at hann orti verr en Þjóðólfr – “enda mun þá first um fara, ef ek leita ekki við at yrkja, enda sé ek ekki við.” (F 269)

[And in the evening, when people sat drinking, they recited (the verses) in front of Halli and said that he wouldn’t be able to compose like that, though he thought himself a great poet. Halli says he knows he composes worse than Þjóðólfr – “but most of all if I don’t get to compose anything, or if I’m not present.”]

This retort is perhaps Halli’s most sarcastic statement in the whole *þáttr*. According to the foundational analysis of H. P. Grice, conversation proceeds according to a number of maxims that ensure the effective communication of a speaker’s message to its recipient. The first “maxim of Quality,” writes Grice, is “[d]o not say what you believe to be false,” and irony, metaphor, and related tropes are (un)clear violations of this maxim.<sup>36</sup> What an ironic or sarcastic statement implies is not what it says, but rather the “contradictory or contrary of the literal meaning.”<sup>37</sup> Halli’s confession to composing less skillfully than Þjóðólfr—or in the Morkinskinna text to being simply “Eigi (...) jafngott skáld sem Þjóðólfr” [“not as good a poet as Þjóðólfr”] (M 269)—is not a true reflection of Halli’s feelings. The reader intuits this implication from context, from Halli’s characteriza-

36 H. P. Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1989), 34.

37 Deirdre Wilson, “The Pragmatics of Verbal Irony: Echo or Pretence?” *Lingua* 116 (2006), 1722–43, at 1723.

tion in the narrative—the first thing we learned about him was that he is *skáld gott* [a good poet] (F 264)—and from the continuation of the speech which veers from straightforward irony into understatement: Halli is least of all able to compete with Þjóðólfr if he is not invited to participate—it is impossible, in other words, to prove one’s ability as a poet if nobody hears one compose. Grzegorz Bartusik is right, I think, to emphasize that Halli’s character represents an over-inflated parody of the traditional court *skáld*, whose day was certainly over by the time the *þáttr* was written down; but Halli’s ability to confound and upstage Þjóðólfr depends in large part on his ability to operate within the norms of skaldic discourse, as well as to transgress them.<sup>38</sup>

In post-Gricean pragmatics, two main theories of irony have become predominant.<sup>39</sup> The “pretense theory” expands on Grice’s idea that “To be ironical is, among other things, to pretend (as the etymology suggests), and while one wants the pretence to be recognised as such, to announce it as a pretence would spoil the effect.”<sup>40</sup> In our example, Halli would be pretending to be not merely a worse poet than Þjóðólfr, but also pretending to be the sort of person who could make, and accept the truth of, such a statement un-ironically. But this example seems better explained by recourse to the so-called “echoic principle” first outlined by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson.<sup>41</sup> The echoic theory of irony suggests that “the speaker in irony does not use the proposition expressed by her utterance in order to represent a thought of her own which she wants the hearer to accept as true, but mentions it in order to represent a thought or utterance she tacitly attributes to someone else, and which she wants to suggest is ludicrously false, under-informative or irrelevant.”<sup>42</sup> By this token, Halli is not *pretending* that the notion of his inferiority to Þjóðólfr is true, but *alluding* to an idea held by others—in this case we know that the Norwegian courtiers hold it to be true in fact—and casting doubt on both the veracity of the idea

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38 Grzegorz Bartusik, “*Sarð hann yðr þá eigi Agði?* Humour and Laughter in the *Sneglu-Halla þáttr*,” in *Histories of Laughter and Laughter in History: HistoRisus*, ed. Rafał Boryślowski, Justyna Jajszczok, Jakub Wolff, and Alicja Bemben (Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2016), 135.

39 For a convenient overview of scholarly treatments of irony, see Herbert L. Colston and Raymond W. Gibbs, Jr., “A Brief History of Irony,” in *Irony in Language and Thought: A Cognitive Science Reader*, ed. Colston and Gibbs (Mahwah, NJ: Routledge, 2007), 3–21.

40 Grice, *Studies in the Way of Words*, 54.

41 I base my account of the echoic theory on Wilson’s “Pragmatics of Verbal Irony,” which builds on almost three decades of criticism following the original publication of Sperber and Wilson’s “Irony and the Use-Mention Distinction,” in *Radical Pragmatics*, ed. Peter Cole (New York: Academic Press, 1981), 295–318.

42 Wilson, “Pragmatics of Verbal Irony,” 1728.

and on the ability of those who hold such an idea to make a trustworthy judgment about the merits of different poets. He is not merely critiquing the implication of his statement, but mocking those who would hold such a statement to be true.

Halli's sarcasm is easily discerned in this case: the courtiers run straight to Haraldr and tell him what Halli had said, interpreting it as meaning that Halli thought himself no less of a poet than Þjóðólfr ["at hann þóttisk eigi minna skáld en Þjóðólfr"] (F 269)—the direct opposite of what he actually said.<sup>43</sup> Of course, Halli intends his real meaning to come out, and his sarcasm is effective. As Brown and Levinson note, "many of the classic off-record strategies—metaphor, irony, understatement, rhetorical questions, etc.—are very often actually on record when used, because the clues to their interpretation...add up to only one really viable interpretation in the context."<sup>44</sup>

The king responds to reports of Halli's off-the-record claim to poetic superiority with another characteristically ambiguous statement: "Konungrinn kvað honum eigi at því verða mundu,—'en vera kann, at vér fáim þetta reynt af stundu'" [The king told them that this wouldn't turn out to be the case, "but it may be that we can get this settled soon"] (F 269). Even if Haraldr implies that Þjóðólfr is probably still the better poet, there is plenty of room for doubt allowed by his statement that the matter has not yet been put to the test (*reynt*). Haraldr has already shown himself to be a keen poet-tester, and subsequent events naturally see Halli prove himself to the king by composing on arbitrary, apparently unpromising subjects or under difficult circumstances—at one point he has to extemporize a stanza in the time it takes the king's dwarf to move halfway across the floor of the hall bearing a platter of food, on pain of death.

To this point, it is certainly Haraldr who has behaved most trollishly, since it is he who uses ambiguous language to provoke and test incomers to his court (and to keep Þjóðólfr on his toes). But Halli has been able to sidestep the king's trolling—and to bring his claims as a poet to Haraldr's attention—with his own skillful manipulation of ambiguity. So far, however, we have not seen evidence of Halli's deployment of ambiguous speech in a directly inflammatory mode. Although he is *orðhvass* (word-sharp) from the start of the narrative, Halli's offensiveness is initially defensive: he uses his wits to deflect insults and slights that are thrown his way by others. He is not a troll, in other words, but one who successfully avoids being trolled. At times he sails close to the wind:

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<sup>43</sup> This aspect of the narrative is missing from Morkinskinna's account, which is not only a more compressed rendering of the story but also seems inclined to smooth over some of the ambiguities present in the *páttir* as it is represented by Flateyjarbók.

<sup>44</sup> Brown and Levinson, *Politeness*, 212.

Halli's antagonism with the king develops over the latter's stinginess at table, which leads the hungry Halli to compose a biting verse about having to trade his sword and shield for a slice of bread and butter, and to a confrontation over gruel. Fed up with not being fed—"don't feed the troll" seems to be king's motto—Halli goes into town to eat some porridge, an act which is represented as an impudent, ironic innuendo about the quality of fare on offer at court:

Peir finna hann, þar sem hann át grautinn. Konungrinn kom þá at ok sá, hvat Halli hafðisk at. Konungrinn var inn reiðasti ok spurði Halla, hví hann fór af Íslandi til höfðingja til þess at gera af sér skömm ok gabb.

"Látið eigi svá, herra," segir Halli, "jafnan sé ek yðr eigi drepa handi við góðum sendingum."

Halli stóð þá upp ok kastaði niðr katlinum, ok skall við haddan. (F 272–73)

[They find him where he was eating porridge. The king came there and saw what Halli was up to. The king was extremely angry, and asked Halli, why he would travel from Iceland to visit chieftains with the object of bringing shame and mockery upon them.

"Don't carry on like that, sire," says Halli. "I never see you refuse {literally, 'slap away with your hand'} good dishes."

Then Halli stood up and threw the cauldron down, and the handle rattled against it.]

Halli's address to the king is a withering use of understatement, heightened by his mock-polite tone—he calls the king *herra* and uses the plural pronoun appropriate to royalty, even as he "burns" Haraldr with the damning innuendo that litotes allows: Halli does not mean merely that the king accepts food with pleasure and good grace, but that he is a selfish glutton, who feasts grandly at one end of the table while some of his men go hungry at the other. And as if to emphasize that he has had the final word, Halli throws down the porridge-cauldron in what we might call a "pot-drop moment."<sup>45</sup> Halli feels that the king—who is well known to feed himself first and order the tables cleared as soon as he has finished eating—will be unable to respond to this slight in any way that would not cause him further loss of face. But the damage has been done—Haraldr is angry, and tries to take revenge on Halli that evening, by having the Icelandic

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<sup>45</sup> Halli's action anticipates the moment when a contemporary comedian or rapper feels that she has scored a hit so pertinent that an opponent would be unable to offer a worthy comeback and drops the microphone to signal that she believes game of one-upmanship is won. The "mic drop" represents the speaker's belief that she has had the last word. This trope has yet to receive any academic attention, but see Forrest Wickman, "When Did People Start Walking Off the Stage Like This? \*Drops Mic\*," Slate.com, January 25, 2013. ([http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/25/a\\_history\\_of\\_the\\_mic\\_drop\\_when\\_did\\_people\\_start\\_dropping\\_the\\_mic.html](http://www.slate.com/blogs/browbeat/2013/01/25/a_history_of_the_mic_drop_when_did_people_start_dropping_the_mic.html), accessed July 28, 2015).



served porridge in the hall and commanding him to eat it until he bursts. Halli gets out of this situation by stating that he is in the king's hands, but that he would rather die by the sword than from a surfeit of gruel (F 274).

After Halli finally appeases Haraldr by composing a praise-poem in his honor, the *þáttr*'s attention moves to the growing antagonism between Halli and Þjóðólfr. The two poets engage in a semi-formal, almost ritualized exchange of accusations and invective that Stephen Mitchell and Elena Gurevich have separately compared to the classical genre of abuse in Old Norse, the *senna*.<sup>46</sup> A *senna* is a sequential exchange of insults or accusations, and its most famous manifestation is the Eddic poem *Lokasenna*, in which Loki airs the dirty linen of the other gods, only to have them accuse him of some equally reprehensible and sometimes quite outlandish crimes in return.<sup>47</sup> Though brief, the poets' interaction in *Sneglu-Halla þáttr* offers a quite typical example of a *senna*-structure.<sup>48</sup> Each participant accuses the other of some shameful action. Often, as here, the accused offers no defense of himself, but instead responds with another accusation in kind. First, Þjóðólfr accuses Halli of deceiving the king by not revealing that he had previously composed a *drápa* (the highest-status form of praise-poem) about his cows in Iceland—the *drápa* that such a yokel might compose about the king, Þjóðólfr implies, would not do him much honor. Rather than deny this accusation, Halli confesses to bovine balladry, but tells the king that Þjóðólfr, in humbler times, had composed a *drápa* about carrying ashes with his siblings—he had been too stupid to be trusted with such a task on his own. The second pair of accusations is more serious: Þjóðólfr accuses Halli of failing to avenge his father's death. He casts this aspersion off-the-record, through innuendo, rather than directly, though the implication of his statement is transparent: “‘En skyldara þœtti mér honum at hefna fǫður síns en eiga sennur við mik hér í Nóregi.’” [“But it seems to me a greater obligation for him to avenge his father than to have *sennas* with me here in Norway”] (F 278). This time, Halli is able to justify his failing: he was too young to take immediate vengeance, and by the time he reached age, his family had settled the case

46 Stephen Mitchell, “Performance and Norse Poetry: The Hydromel of Praise and the Effluvia of Scorn,” *Oral Tradition* 16 (2001), 168–202, at 191; Elena Gurevich, “From Accusation to Narration: The Transformation of the *senna* in *Íslendingaþættir*,” *Scripta Islandica* 60 (2009): 61–76.

47 On the *senna* in general, see Karen Swenson, *Performing Definitions: Two Genres of Insult in Old Norse Literature* (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1991); Joseph Harris, “The *senna*: From Description to Literary Theory,” *Michigan Germanic Studies* 5 (1979): 65–74; Marcel Bax and Tineke Padmos, “Two Types of Verbal Dueling in Old Icelandic: the Interactional Structure of the ‘Senna’ and ‘Mannjafnaðr’ in *Hárbarðsljóð*,” *Scandinavian Studies* 55 (1983), 149–74.

48 Gurevich, “From Accusation to Narration,” 64–7.

over his father's homicide. He adds, rather sanctimoniously: "En þat þykkir illt nafn á váru landi at heita griðníðingr." ["But it's considered a bad name, in *our* country, to be called a truce-breaker"] (F 278).

The "mic-drop moment" in this *senna* is brought about by the accusation that Halli pairs with Þjóðólfr's intimations of cowardice. He knows a horrible secret about Þjóðólfr that presumably has not previously been heard in Norway: Halli may not have avenged his father, but that is surely better than the gruesome alternative—Þjóðólfr, says Halli, *ate* his father's killer ["hann át sinn fðurbana"] (F 279). The implication—that Þjóðólfr has broken one of society's most profound taboos—is monstrous and causes uproar in the court. But Halli is showing off another side of his *orðhvass* wit: his words have a double meaning. The implication of his statement is that Þjóðólfr has tasted human flesh; the courtiers react to this appalling surface meaning. But the joke is soon revealed: Þjóðólfr's father had been accidentally strangled by a calf that he had been leading on a leash, and Þjóðólfr and his brothers took eminently pragmatic vengeance on their father's slayer by enjoying a high-protein diet for a while. The truth of the matter is hardly less shameful for Þjóðólfr than cannibalism would have been, as his father is shown to have died in a buffoonish, anti-heroic manner, without giving his family any opportunity to gain recompense through a settlement or prestige through a revenge-killing. Þjóðólfr has no comeback to this final loss of face and reaches for his sword. The king, who has been egging on the two poets and enjoying himself greatly at their expense, has to intervene to prevent Þjóðólfr wounding Halli with blows where he has failed to with his jibes.

*Sneglu-Halla þátrr's* version of the *senna* has a certain amount in common with online trolling, and particularly to abusive, "anonymous" trolling: it is a form of verbal interaction the goal of which is to cause another participant to lose face; one loses the encounter when one loses the ability to respond in kind to an insult—to give as good as one has gotten—or loses one's cool. There is a gate-keeping aspect to the interaction: it is a test of wits that is designed to weed out the witless. It walks—and crosses—the line between humor and simple abuse. But although it relies on ambiguity for its effect, this *senna* is heavily invested in the truth of the accusations that are made. Trolls have no attachment to the truth of the statements they make: they are in it only for what the internet knows as "lulz" (laughs or kicks derived from the distress of others).<sup>49</sup> In the *senna*, however, every accusation must be founded in truth. It

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<sup>49</sup> Phillips, *This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things*, 57, defines "lulz" as "acute amusement in the face of someone else's distress, embarrassment, or rage."

seems that it would not be proper mockery to accuse people of offenses or failings that they are not guilty of—the *senna* is a contest of who knows more, not who can invent better. And, above all, these encounters are predicated on the participants' (often intimate) knowledge of each other's real identity.<sup>50</sup> An anonymous *senna* is an impossibility: it is by its nature a face-to-face, unmediated exchange between individuals.

A better example of trolling—indeed, perhaps the most sophisticated in the whole story—sees Halli cutting a Norwegian nobleman down to size. This man, Einarr fluga, has a hard reputation that includes an absolute refusal to pay compensation for any man he kills—people are too afraid of him to pursue either law cases or vengeance. Halli objects to this sort of behavior and tells his friend Sigurðr that he would not be afraid to accuse him of a killing and would expect to receive compensation: “þá segi ek þér þat, at ek skylda kæra, ef hann gerði mér rangt, ok þess get ek, at hann boeti mér” (F 281). He and his friend Sigurðr even wager on the matter. This boast and bet pave the way for Halli's most impressive act of trolling, which is made the more palatable since his victim is painted so villainously.

When Einarr tells the assembled throng of his summer's adventures, he mentions capturing an Icelandic ship under a pretext and putting the whole crew to death, including one particularly brave sailor, who was also named Einarr. Although this piracy was done in the king's name, the king tells Einarr fluga that he behaved badly in killing innocent men, before Halli suddenly announces that Einarr the Iclander, the victim, had been his brother—a fact that the *þátrr* has not mentioned to this point. He demands compensation; Einarr fluga refuses. Halli makes the same demand again the following day, with the same result. Finally, Halli has to use yet another variety of ambiguous speech to frighten Einarr into submitting. Halli visits King Haraldr and tells him that he dreamed he was an earlier poet, Þorleifr, and composed a slanderous poem about Earl Hákon of Hlaðir, who had ruled most of Norway at the end of the tenth century: “Ek þóttumk vera Þorleifr skáld, en hann Einarr fluga þótti mér vera Hákon jarl Sigurðarson, ok þóttumk hafa ort um hann níð, ok munða ek sumt níðit, er ek vaknaða.” [“I seemed to myself to be the poet Þorleifr, and it seemed to me

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<sup>50</sup> For this reason, the *senna* would correlate to what is known as “outing,” or, in internet culture, “doxxing”—the bringing into the public sphere of information concerning a person's private behavior or identity that he or she would prefer to remain private. Doxxing, properly applied to the revelation without permission of the real-world identity that lies behind someone's online presence, is used as a tool of intimidation, revenge, or harassment. Outing—for example revealing a person's undeclared sexual preferences—is more typically associated with extortion and tabloid prurience.

that Einarr fluga was Earl Hákon Sigurðarson, and I thought that I had composed *níð* about him, and I remembered some of the *níð* when I woke up”] (F 285)<sup>51</sup>

The *níð*-verses that Halli alludes to here refer to a particular—and particularly shameful—form of sexualized insult that is mentioned frequently in medieval Scandinavian law and Old Norse literature. Accusations of *níð* bring with them connotations of a range of intertwined, highly stigmatized behaviors and identities—cowardice, effeminacy, and (especially) passive participation in homosexual intercourse.<sup>52</sup> There were few things worse for one Norseman to accuse another of—and the underlying truth of the charges seems to have been largely irrelevant to the damage that such an accusation could do to a person’s reputation. So even though Halli never delivers the *níð* that came to him in a dream, and even though its subject is not explicitly identified as Einarr fluga, the threat that Halli holds over Einarr is so dangerous, now that he has conceived of this *níð* against him, that the king is forced to act on it:

Konungr mælti: “Þetta var ekki draumr annarr en hann dregr þessi dømi saman; ok svá mun fara með ykkir sem fór með þeim Hákon Hlaðarjarli ok Þorleifi skáldi, ok þat sama gerir Halli; hann svífisk einskis, ok megu vit sjá, at bitit hefa níðit ríkari menn en svá sem þú ert, Einarr, sem var Hákon jarl, ok mun þat munat, meðan Norðrlönd eru byggð, ok er verri einn kvíðlingr, ef munaðr verðr eptir, en lítill fémúta, um dýran mann kveðinn, ok ger svá vel ok leys hann af með nokkuru.” (F 286)

[The king said: “This was no dream; rather, he compared these examples. And so it will go with the two of you as it went with Earl Hákon of Hlaðir and the poet Þorleifr. Halli is doing the same thing. He shrinks from nothing, and we can see that *níð* has bitten more powerful men than you are, Einarr. Such a one was Earl Hákon, and that will be remembered for as long as the northern lands are inhabited. A single little verse spoken about a wealthy man, if it is remembered afterwards, is worse than a small bribe. Do please buy him off with something.”]

Einarr reluctantly complies, paying Halli three marks of silver. Nowhere else in a *þáttr* full of powerful speeches is the power of speech, and of poetry in particu-

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51 The story of Þorleifr’s slandering of the earl is told and the *níð*-verses quoted in *Þorleifs þáttr jarlsskálds*, another *þáttr* found in Flateyjarbók. The performance of *níð* in this *þáttr* does harm far beyond the reputational: it actually wreaks physical damage on the earl’s person: his beard falls off, he loses consciousness, and some of his men simply die, so forceful is the *níð* in this manifestation.

52 See Folke Ström, *Níð, Ergi and Old Norse Moral Attitudes. The Dorothea Coke Memorial Lecture in Northern Studies delivered at University College London, 10 May 1973* (London: Viking Society for Northern Research, 1974); Preben Meulengracht Sørensen, *The Unmanly Man. Concepts of Sexual Defamation in Early Northern Society*, trans. by Joan Turville-Petre, The Viking Collection 1 (Odense: Odense University Press, 1983).

lar, asserted more clearly. The directly dangerous implications of *níð* are yet another variation on the text's concern with the *orðhvass* poet's almost supernatural ability to manipulate others by deploying verbal weapons of various sorts. But here, surely, Halli is neither being sarcastic nor trolling Einarr: accusations of *níð* are too heinous to be made ironically, and Halli does not introduce them into the public sphere. The threat of hurling *níð* at his enemy is made indirectly, framed by Halli's (disingenuous) dream-description. It perhaps recalls the sort of extortion that the threat of "outing" someone as gay might facilitate in the modern era, but it does not conform to our definitions of trolling because it takes place in a private sphere, is not anonymous, and does not actually produce a loss of face in the victim.

Yet the episode with Einarr fluga is the absolute highpoint of Halli's career as a troll, for the quite simple reason that he has never had a brother named Einarr: "En þér satt at segja, þá áttu ek aldri skylt við þenna mann, er Einarr hefir drepit, ok vilda ek vita, ef ek næða fénu af honum" ["But to tell you truthfully, I had no obligation to the man whom Einarr killed. I just wanted to see if I couldn't get some money off him"] (F 287). He succeeds in getting compensation from the Norwegian nobleman—something no one else has ever managed—by inventing a partial new identity for himself and by making a claim the truth of which cannot be known by the victim of his trolling; he finally causes Einarr to lose face not by slandering him, but by hoodwinking him into paying compensation unnecessarily. There is also something of the troll's arbitrariness in Halli's actions: although he is glad to get the money, and though everyone is pleased to see the noxious Einarr cut down to size, Halli's decision to impersonate a dead man's relative is an off-the-cuff move made primarily to see if he can get away with it. The *þáttr* does not record whether Einarr even knows that Halli has played him like this: the amusement produced by the final knowledge of Halli's trick is only shared between him and Sigurðr.

Snegla-Halli is no *troll* in the Old Norse sense of the word, but by his words he is made monstrous, in the sense that he is ungovernable, hard to deal with. He can be sarcastic, certainly, but sarcasm is not the only verbal means by which he confounds his enemies and makes his way in the world. He deploys multiple sorts of *tívarðisorð* ("double-meaning-words") throughout the narrative: irony, understatement, disguised, off-the-record invective, and the inherent ambiguity of poetry are chief among them. He uses these techniques to win out against higher-status opponents by flouting social conventions while *appearing* to remain just about within the bounds of what passes for politeness at King Haraldr's court. This court, however, is dominated by men who take delight and gain prestige in verbal sparring. Throughout the *þáttr*, Halli gets almost as

much as he gives: Haraldr, and to a lesser extent Þjóðólfr, are also expert manipulators of the affective possibilities of ambiguous language.

And it is this manipulation, rather than the ambiguity of the statements themselves, which is the real hallmark of *Sneglu-Halla þáttr's* verbal warfare. Many different types of ambiguity and invective can be used to produce reactions in others. The *þáttr* delights in displaying the full range of these and revels in their sophistication and brute force alike. Some of these techniques are well attested elsewhere in Old Norse literature—the *senna* and the composition of *níð*-verses, for example. But as a whole, the complex of linguistic and social behaviors that the characters engage in in this text resonate sharply with the apparently utterly modern phenomenon of online trolling. Characters troll each other to police social boundaries, keeping outsiders out and enhancing group cohesion; they exploit the possibilities offered by anonymity to make claims and statements that social conventions would prohibit if the participants' identities were known to each other; they use different methods of dissimulation to distance their speech acts from their real thoughts and feelings; they aim to gain face by making their opponents lose face. Sometimes, their purposes in engaging in these verbal duels are clear; at other times, they engage in “flame wars” that have no obvious motivation—which gives them the impression that they might almost be trolling “for lulz”: taking a pure, malicious, nihilistic delight in another's annoyance or embarrassment. By this (consciously anachronistic) reading, we see that the internet troll may only be the latest manifestation of socio-linguistic behaviors that have a longer pedigree than we have realized. “Sarcastic” Halli and the no less word-sharp King Haraldr provide anticipatory models for the Janus-faced trolls that have recently flourished on the internet—simultaneously maintaining and disrupting social relations, finding humor in offense and offense in humor, and simply delighting in deception.

Máire Johnson

# Snark and the Saint

## The Art of the Irish Curse

The medieval *Lives* of Ireland's saints survive in more than one hundred Latin *Lives*, or *vitae*, and approximately fifty or so *bethada* (sg. *betha*, *bethu*) in Old Irish, Middle Irish, or a mixture of Latin and the vernacular.<sup>1</sup> The dating of many of these texts remains a pernicious issue, but it is generally accepted that the corpus extends from the seventh century to the end of the Middle Ages.<sup>2</sup> These *Lives* are, first and foremost, meant to demonstrate the holiness

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Variations of some of the material in this essay have previously appeared in Máire Johnson, "Vengeance is Mine': Sainly Retribution in Medieval Ireland," in *Vengeance in the Middle Ages: Emotion, Religion, and Feud*, ed. Paul Hyams and Susanna Throop (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2010), 5–50; "Medicine and Miracle: Law Enforcement in the *Lives* of Irish Saints," in *Medicine and the Law in the Middle Ages*, ed. Wendy J. Turner and Sara M. Butler (Leiden: Brill, 2014), 288–316; "In the Bursting of an Eye: Blinding and Blindness in Ireland's Medieval Hagiography," in *Wounds and Wound Repair in Medieval Culture*, ed. Kelly DeVries and Larissa Tracy (Leiden: Brill, 2015), 448–70; and "The Injury of Insult: Punishing Verbal Assault in Ireland's Medieval Hagiography," *Australian Celtic Journal* 13 (2015): 9–32.

1 See, e.g., Charles Doherty, "The Irish Hagiographer: Resources, Aims, Results," in *The Writer as Witness: Literature as Historical Evidence*, ed. Tom Dunne (Cork: Cork University Press, 1987), 10–11; and Richard Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives: An Introduction to Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 5–6. From this point forward, "*vitae*" refers to those texts written entirely in Latin, "*bethada*" to works wholly or primarily in the vernacular, and "*Lives*" to both.

2 Sharpe, *Medieval Irish Saints' Lives*, 5–6, 347–63. For more recent updates and revisions to Sharpe's dating, see particularly Pádraig Ó Riain, *Beatha Bharra: St. Finbarr of Cork, the Complete Life* (London: Irish Texts Society, 1994), 94–8, 109–12; Ó Riain, "Codex Salmanticensis: A Provenance Inter Anglos or Inter Hibernos?" in 'A Miracle of Learning': *Studies in Manuscripts and Irish Learning*, ed. Toby Barnard, Dáibhí Ó Cróinín, and Katharine Simms (Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing, 1998), 91–100; William O'Sullivan, "A Waterford Origin for the Codex Salmanticensis," *Decies: Journal of the Waterford Archaeological and Historical Society* 54 (1998): 17–24; Caoimhín Breatnach, "The Significance of the Orthography of Irish Proper Names in the Codex Salmanticensis," *Ériu* 55 (2005): 85–101; Pádraig Ó Riain, *A Dictionary of Irish Saints* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2011), 39–42; and Ó Riain, "The O'Donohue Lives of the Salamanca Codex: The Earliest Collection of Irish Saints' Lives?" in *Gablánach in Scélaigeacht: Celtic Studies in Honour of Ann Dooley*, ed. Sarah Sheehan, Joanne Findon, and Westley Follett (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2013), 38–52. Throughout this essay I will provide, either in the body of the text, the footnotes, or both, as much dating information as is possible, along with references where additional debate on the issue may be researched.



of their subjects through the presence of plentiful miracles; such wonders prove the close relationship between God and his agents and advance both the Church's authority and the preeminence of the Christian faith. The miracles of Ireland's medieval *vitae* and *bethada*, moreover, also frame an idealized Irish society led by the Church and her saints. This portrayal of holy Irish men and women as the arbiters of law and order particularly emerges through the use of a wry hagiographical humor by which the saints capably uphold the tenets of early Irish law, punish wrongdoers, establish a form of contract between themselves and their followers, and elevate their own sanctified status, all with a well-timed bit of snark.

The vernacular and canon law texts of early Ireland, most of which date between the eighth and tenth centuries, delineate a complex social hierarchy in which a person's status was based upon honor-price, or the recompense due to individuals for injury to themselves, their dependents, their property, or their rights. Various called *enech*, *díre*, or *lóg n-enech*, honor-price depended upon a person's gender and social position; though normally described in terms of livestock, it could also be assessed as an equivalent value in silver.<sup>3</sup> Irish saints were abbots, abbesses, bishops, archbishops and, more often than not, members of aristocratic lineages. As a result, they could command significant honor-prices.<sup>4</sup> If those who wronged saints in the *Lives* were to pay for their misdeeds in this traditional fashion, they would be financially and socially

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3 Numerous civil and canon law texts attend to the issue of defining the rights, privileges, and obligations of Ireland's many social grades, such as §§1–2, *Bretha Déin Chécht*, ed. and tr. D. A. Binchy, "Bretha Déin Chécht," *Ériu* 20 (1966): 22–3; see also pp. 3–5 for the dating of this vernacular law code to the eighth century. The entirety of the contemporary tract known as *Críth Gablach*, ed. D. A. Binchy (1941; repr. Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1970), is devoted to the definition of social grade and honor-price; see pp. xiii–xv for date. *Críth Gablach* has also been translated by Eóin MacNeill, "Ancient Irish Law: The Law of Status or Franchise," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 36C (1923), 281–306. See also §§13, 15 of the eighth-century *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, ed. and tr. Liam Breatnach, "The First Third of *Bretha Nemed Toísech*," *Ériu* 40 (1989): 14–15 (for the date see pp. 2–3 and Breatnach's discussion of it in "Canon Law and Secular Law in Early Ireland: The Significance of *Bretha Nemed*," *Peritia* 3 (1984): 439–59); the early eighth-century ecclesiastical work, *Collectio Canonum Hibernensis* Lib. V–VIII, ed. Hermann Wasserschleben, *Die irische Kanonensammlung* (1885; repr. Aalen: Scientia Verlag, 1966), 3–26 (see again Breatnach, "Canon Law and Secular Law," for the dating of the *Collectio*); and §§1, 2, 4–5 of the likewise-dated *Bretha Crólige*, ed. and tr. D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* 12 (1938): 6–9, with chronology on p. 1. For additional scholarship on status, see particularly Fergus Kelly, *A Guide to Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1988), 8, 41–43, and Riitta Latvio, "Status and Exchange in Early Irish Laws," *Studia Celtica Fennica* 2 (2005): 67–96. On the definition of property, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 99–124.

4 §§13, 15, *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, Breatnach, 14–15; also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 7–12, 41–3.



ruined. The sinners of hagiography, however, receive miraculous, often sarcastic penalties that sidestep honor-price yet still reinforce not only Irish law but also the standing both of the saint and of the Irish Church.

The legal enumeration of Ireland's social hierarchy makes plain the critical role of interpersonal relationships in maintaining social order. Medieval Ireland was a loose mosaic of numerous, often contesting tribal chiefdoms of varying size and influence.<sup>5</sup> In such a decentralized world, it was the contractual bonds of loyalty that provided any sense of stability; both vernacular and canon law and the *Lives* of Ireland's saints, each in their own way, thus emphasize the definition of personal and corporate status, as well as the procedures for navigating the disputes that could otherwise threaten the social networks that tied Irish society together.<sup>6</sup>

Yet where the law texts assess fines like honor-price to punish lawbreakers and recompense the wronged, the *vitae* and *bethada* use punitive saintly miracles to perform the same function. Where the cutting sarcasm of snark appears, it emphasizes to what extraordinary degree a saint could strip away a malefactor's status. The Irish saint's *Life*, then, lays out the terms of the social, economic, spiritual, and legal contract between the saint, the Church, and their followers, and uses hagiographical penalties to draw a clear line between those who are full members of Irish Christian society and those who are not. In the process, the *Life* and its snarky *miracula* also assert the Church's place as the framer of both religion and law, and therefore also as Ireland's centralizing authority.

Admittedly, imputing a sarcastic intent to medieval texts is a subjective matter; it is natural to apply such a tone to a narrative that would be snarky in a modern context, when a medieval author may not have had the same idea. But there is a pattern that aids in identifying cases of saintly sarcasm in Ireland's medieval *Lives*. First, they all involve some form of verbal assault.<sup>7</sup> Second, most are multi-layered *exempla* of all the things one should never do to or in the presence of a saint; that is, their wrongdoers are guilty of far more than just one mis-

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5 Robin Chapman Stacey, *The Road to Judgment: From Custom to Court in Medieval Ireland and Wales* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1994); Thomas Charles-Edwards, *Early Christian Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000); and D. Blair Gibson, *From Chiefdom to State in Early Ireland* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) have all made this definition of Ireland a central component of their studies. See also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 40–41, 167–171.

6 Stacey, *Road to Judgment*, 6, 27, 56, 66–9; also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 40–41, 167–71; and Thomas Charles-Edwards, "Early Irish Law," in *A New History of Ireland Volume I: Prehistoric and Ancient Ireland*, ed. Dáibhí Ó Cróinín (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 342–3, 368.

7 For more on verbal assault in the *Lives* of Ireland's medieval saints, see Johnson, "The Injury of Insult."

deed. Finally, there is almost never an opportunity of either short-term penance or full restoration to the community of the faithful, because in most instances, the penalties either are lethal or comprise judgments that make the satisfaction of a penitential sentence impossible. Indeed, where the modern view of sarcasm often involves the dry statement of the opposite of what is actually true or intended, the punitive miracles of Ireland's *Lives* are themselves snarky actions rather than merely words and thus showcase snark as a wry directness, consistent with some medieval conceptions of sarcasm as direct insult without an "opposite" meaning.<sup>8</sup> The force of this snarky directness is often augmented, however, by multiple levels of meaning, as well as a sometimes surprisingly earthy and frequently sharp humor. In the end, though, these stories are not about their note of sarcasm, however entertaining that note may be. Instead they demonstrate the saint's ability to define and defend the boundaries of the Irish Christian community through a reciprocal relationship between their foundations and their adherents and to advance an ecclesiastical claim that the Church was Ireland's only centralizing authority.

One of the earliest snarky episodes can be found in the seventh-century *vita* of the famous St. Patrick as written by Muirchú moccu Macthéni, an episode that draws either directly or through an intermediary upon the letter of the historical Patrick himself to a maleficent chieftain, Coroticus.<sup>9</sup> In the *vita*, this ruler is called Corictic. According both to the *vita* and to the *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*, Patrick contends for some time with this Corictic because the latter, despite having apparently been baptized as a Christian and despite every attempt to stop him, continues to seize recent converts to the new faith and sell them into slavery

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<sup>8</sup> Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony*, Columbia Studies in the Classical Tradition, Vol. 16 (Leiden, New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 154.

<sup>9</sup> Both Muirchú's *Vita S. Patricii* and Patrick's letter, *Epistola ad Milites Corotici*, are preserved alongside Patrick's *apologia pro sua vita*, *Confessio*, in the ninth-century *Book of Armagh* (Dublin, Trinity College, MS 52); see James F. Kenney, *The Sources for the Early History of Ireland (Ecclesiastical): An Introduction and Guide* (1929, 1966; repr. Dublin: Pádraic Ó Tailliúr, 1979), 326–7, 337–9, and Ludwig Bieler, ed. and tr., *The Patrician Texts in the Book of Armagh* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1979), 2–3, 20–21, 35. Muirchú's work has been reliably dated to the later seventh century based upon references he makes to the writings of Cogitosus, who compiled the *Vita S. Brigitae* c. 650—again based upon internal references. See, e.g., Charles Doherty, "The Cult of St. Patrick and the Politics of Armagh in the Seventh Century," in *Ireland and Northern France AD 600–850*, ed. Jean-Michel Picard (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1991), 75–82 and Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 527–8. David Howlett has produced more recent editions of both Muirchú and the letters of Patrick; the citations to Muirchú in this essay, however, refer to the rather more accessibly-styled Bieler, *Patrician Texts*. For Howlett, consult *The Book of Letters of St. Patrick the Bishop* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1994), and Muirchú moccu Macthéni's '*Vita Sancti Patricii*': *Life of Saint Patrick* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 2006).

or, in some instances, to murder them. That is certainly enough to rouse the saint's ire, but when news reaches Patrick that Corictic is actually mocking the saint's demands that he cease and desist, Patrick beseeches God to expel the disdainful chap both "*de praesenti saeculoque futuro*" [from this world and the next].<sup>10</sup> Report of Patrick's prayer then reaches Corictic's court, whereupon his nobles and bard begin to chant a verse calling for him to forfeit his rule. The moment the sound of the chant reaches Corictic's ears, he is publicly transformed into a fox. The animal flees, never to be seen again.<sup>11</sup>

As is generally the case in Irish episodes of hagiographical sarcasm, there are numerous narrative layers. First, Muirchú is careful to emphasize that Corictic-the-fox is *small*; the Latin word Muirchú uses is *vulpiculus*, the diminutive form of *vulpes*. This braggadocious ruler, so proud of his battlefield accomplishments, becomes less than even the average-sized animal would be. Second, foxes held a common reputation in the medieval world—much as they often do today—as deceitful creatures. Isidore of Seville, for example, that great seventh-century bishop of Toledo, whose work had a significant impact on the Irish, wrote that *vulpes* derives etymologically from *volubilis* (shifty, changeable) and *pes* (foot), meaning "shifty on its feet."<sup>12</sup> In this light, Muirchú's choice of the *vulpiculus* serves to declare Corictic an untrustworthy purveyor of jiggery-pokery in addition to being an unrepentant enemy of Ireland's Christian converts.

Third, in the historical Patrick's letter to Corictic, the saint is emphatic in his condemnation of the chieftain and his unremorseful gang of ruffians, a derisive and violent bunch he calls "*lupi rapaces*" [rapacious wolves].<sup>13</sup> Wolves are often associated with warriors in both a positive and a negative sense throughout medieval Irish literature, as noted separately by Kim McCone and John Carey.<sup>14</sup> But

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<sup>10</sup> All translations from Latin in this essay are my own; translations from Old or Middle Irish rely somewhat more heavily on the work of other scholars unless otherwise indicated in the notes. Any orthographical variations in cited Latin or vernacular works are original to the source texts—including in the original titles.

<sup>11</sup> Ch. 1.29 *Vita S Patricii*, Bieler, *Patrician Texts*, 100.

<sup>12</sup> *Etymologiae* XII.29, ed. and tr. Stephen A. Barney et al., *The Etymologies of Isidore of Seville* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 253. On the influence of Isidore in medieval Ireland see, e.g., J. N. Hillgarth, "The East, Visigothic Spain, and the Irish," *Studia Patristica* 4 (1961): 442–56, and Hillgarth, "Visigothic Spain and Early Christian Ireland," *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy* 62C (1962): 167–92 and plate 45.

<sup>13</sup> *Epistola*, Howlett, 27.

<sup>14</sup> Kim McCone, "Werewolves, Cyclopes, *Díberga*, and *Fianna*: Juvenile Delinquency in Early Ireland," *Cambridge Medieval Celtic Studies* 12 (Winter 1986): 1–22; see pp. 20–2 for the more

while Corictic may envision himself as a wolf in the sense of a powerful fighter and leader, Muirchú opts to “cut him down to size” through his metamorphosis into a frightened little fox kit. Such a startling transformation certainly strips the ruler of his virile warrior prowess—a fairly common theme to snarky episodes—and sarcastically leaves Corictic as a mere vulpine echo of the mighty wolf of war he had once been.

Fourth, the episode also provides an excellent glimpse at the Irish view of the power of the spoken word. To the writers of medieval Ireland, a declaration delivered with the right phrasing, rhythm, rhyme, and intonation could heal or harm, elevate or destroy its target.<sup>15</sup> A particular class of verbal pronouncement was satire, which, due to its perceived ability to wound or kill, occupies a prominent place in the ecclesiastical and vernacular law codes of the period.<sup>16</sup> Roisin McLaughlin, for instance, has outlined the way the legal tract *Bretha Nemed Dédenach* details the proper poetic meters, content, and delivery of satire, as well as noting the case studies of proper and improper satire provided by literary works such as *Cath Maige Tuired*.<sup>17</sup> A satire was proper and legal if it was correctly pronounced and if the target was actually guilty of the allegations the satire contained. In such instances, it was intended to compel the target—or perhaps “defendant” is a better term—to agree to some sort of mediation or recompense. If the defendant did not make an immediate oath to either pay due restitution or to submit to arbitration, he legally forfeited his honor-price and with it his legal standing. As a result, rulers who neglected to respond to satire could also be deprived of their sovereignty.<sup>18</sup>

In the tale of St. Patrick and Corictic, there are two components to the legal satire that results in the warrior’s startling metamorphosis. St. Patrick’s prayer that Corictic be removed from existence both now and in the afterlife may be seen as the first. Corictic is definitely guilty of the wrongdoing of which he has been accused, and the fact that the prayer doesn’t result in an immediate conse-

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savage aspects of wolf imagery. John Carey, “Werewolves in Medieval Ireland,” *Cambrian Medieval Celtic Studies* 44 (Winter 2002): 37–72, esp. 52 and 69–70.

<sup>15</sup> See for example the cause and cure of blisters through unjust—and then just—legal pronouncements in *Din Techtugud*, Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 358.

<sup>16</sup> See §§23–4 *Uraicecht ne Riar*, ed. and tr. Liam Breatnach *Uraicecht na Riar: The Poetic Grades in Early Irish Law* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1987), 114–15, for one case. Also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 137–9 and Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 2008), 4–8.

<sup>17</sup> *Early Irish Satire*, 4, 6–8.

<sup>18</sup> §21, *Críth Gablach*, Binchy, 12–13; §§100–101, “Ancient Irish Law,” MacNeill, 295–6. Also see §40, *Críth Gablach*, ed. and tr. Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 360–361, for other things that could deprive a king of status and rule.

quence suggests that there was a window of time in which, had he acted in accordance with the saint's wishes, Corictic might have avoided having to pay such a penalty. He gives no response, however. Thus the second component comes into play when "someone" (*quodam*) begins a chant that demands Corictic's abdication, and the warriors of his entourage join in. Their act signals an awareness that their leader has already lost his standing because he had not offered an appropriate reply to the saint's prayer, which itself functions as a component to the legal satire; it also recognizes implicitly the links between satire and saintly cursing, a correlation outlined by Tomás Ó Cathasaigh.<sup>19</sup> As a result, the moment the sound of the chant falls upon Corictic's ears he is stripped of all honor, status, sovereignty, and humanity, and vanishes into the forest as a *vulpiculus*.

Finally, there is also the scriptural layer to consider. In the canonical texts, the strongest correlation is that of Luke 13:32, in which Jesus calls King Herod Antipas a fox (*vulpes*). Herod Antipas was known for having yielded to the intrigue of his wife and stepdaughter and first imprisoning, then ordering the decapitation of John the Baptist.<sup>20</sup> Muirchú certainly seems to make a direct comparison between the perfidious Corictic and the untrustworthy Herod; after all, Corictic had been enslaving and killing Christians despite Patrick's demands he cease, much as Herod had ordered John the Baptist's beheading despite his own awareness of the injustice.<sup>21</sup> There is also a possibility that Muirchú incorporated elements from the portrait of the child Jesus in the apocryphal *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*.<sup>22</sup> Here, the young Christ seeks playmates among the village boys, but they hide from him. When asked where the lads are, their mothers lie to Jesus, saying they have seen only goats; Jesus then summons the "goats," and they emerge from hiding as quadruped kids. Their mothers, understandably dismayed, beseech Christ's mercy, and the child Savior once again calls the boys out—as humans.<sup>23</sup> In both the biblical and the apocryphal parallel, Muirchú declares that Corictic is a criminal and murderer, while St. Patrick is

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19 "Curse and Satire," *Éigse* 21 (1986): 10–15.

20 Matthew 14 (Mark 6; Luke 3).

21 For the view of one medieval Irish exegete on this passage, see *Commentarium in Lucam e Codice Vindobense Latino* 13:32, ed. Joseph Kelly, in *Scriptores Hiberniae Minores Pars II* (Turnhout: Brepols, 1974), 83. This early-eighth-century tract is from continental Irish circles.

22 A version of this apocryphon was known in Ireland in the seventh century, and it was subsequently translated into versified Old Irish around 700 CE. Martin McNamara, "Notes on the Irish Gospel of Thomas," *The Irish Theological Quarterly* n.s.38.1 (1971): 42–66; also McNamara, *Apocrypha in the Irish Church* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1975), 1, 8.

23 §40, *Infancy Gospel of Thomas*, ed. and tr. J. K. Elliott, *The Apocryphal New Testament* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1993), 106.

the savior to the Irish, his sanctity aligned directly with that of Jesus Christ himself.

In essence, then, Muirchú has accomplished a sophisticated statement with a single episode of the *Vita S Patricii*, all through the medium of a fairly snarky curse. Corictic doesn't just become a fox—that would be too simple. He becomes a *little* fox. Muirchú's St. Patrick denigrates Corictic's vaunted warrior prowess and political power, and then rips both of them away along with Corictic's humanity. Nothing is left of the man he had been; all that remains is a trembling creature known for deceit and linked with a deeply disliked biblical ruler. At the same time, Patrick himself is elevated through the pronouncement of a prayer the manifestation of which embodies miraculous sarcasm. Corictic's metamorphosis and flight irrefutably prove that the real Irish authority is the saint and the God whom he represents, and whose grace moves through him to effect Corictic's punishment. There's no exacting of honor-price here. Instead, the punitive consequence that befalls Corictic upholds the same legal strictures without the exchange of any kind of compensatory fee and demonstrates the ecclesiastical ability to take away the same political power it could bestow. The line between membership in and exclusion from the Christian community, to which Corictic at least nominally had belonged, is thus firmly drawn and reinforced in a very visible and humorous debasement.

Satire of various sorts continues to be a prominent technique in later episodes of saintly sarcasm. Take for example the later-twelfth-century story of St. Comgall of Bangor, who must contend with a cruel raider (*raptor*) named Fergus, who has a distinct propensity for raiding the ecclesiastical foundations under Comgall's oversight and protection.<sup>24</sup> When Fergus rustles cattle from one such nuns' community, St. Comgall demands that Fergus return the beasts of burden. Fergus refuses, berating Comgall "*ore pestifero verbisque asperrimis*" [with a poisonous mouth and the cruelest words]. The following night, in a fine moment of hagiographical snark, Fergus "*morte pessima in vindictam sui sceleris mortuus est*" [dies the worst death in vengeance for his crime] while engaged in sexual relations with his wife.<sup>25</sup> Fergus's insulting abuse constitutes the crime of verbal assault in early Irish law. The nastiness implied by *ore pestifero verbisque asperrimis* specifically suggests a type of illegal satire known as *glámad gnúise* [satirizing to the face], an unjust and public reviling often—but not always—envisioned as the delivery of nasty imprecations from well within someone's "per-

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<sup>24</sup> On the date, consult Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 218.

<sup>25</sup> Ch. 53 *Vita S Comgalli Abbatis de Bennchor*, ed. Charles Plummer, *Vitae Sanctorum Hiberniae II* (1910; repr. Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1997), 19.

sonal space.” *Glámad gnúise*, as with any verbal attack, would normally require the payment of St. Comgall’s full honor-price.<sup>26</sup>

It is plain that Fergus’s verbal assault upon the saint is packaged into the reasons for his demise *in flagrante delicto*, but there are several additional elements that also contribute to the severity of his wrongdoing. Fergus’s first crime was brigandage, an act that accounts for more than thirty-three additional hagiographical accounts of saintly vengeance in both Latin and the vernacular.<sup>27</sup> The opprobrium reserved for such violent plundering is also visible outside of hagiography, as a stream of legal commentary makes both direct and oblique reference to the dark fate due the brigand. The eighth-century tract *Críth Gablach*, for instance, decrees that any individuals subjected to the depredations of reavers are due their full honor-price in addition to restitution penalties for their material losses.<sup>28</sup> It also observes that the eligibility of some lower social grades to retain their status depends upon their ability to remain innocent of particular crimes—including plundering.<sup>29</sup> Loss of status may suggest the applicability of the death penalty; early Irish saga depicts a band of brigands receiving the death sentence for their crime, something Fergus Kelly has also noted.<sup>30</sup> At the same time, *Bretha Crólige* declares that a brigand should receive the support of sick-maintenance only at the level of a commoner regardless of his actual lineage, status, or rights otherwise.<sup>31</sup> *Bechbretha*, too, notes that brigands who do not make the proper restitution payments are not eligible for sanctuary, while *Bretha Nemed Toísech* states that plunderers are barred from dealing with a Church or entering its congregation—in essence, they are excommunicate.<sup>32</sup>

Canon law also had plenty to say on the subject. The seventh-century *Canones Hibernenses*, for example, requires the payment of a fine equal to the value of seven slave women in addition to seven years’ penance, particularly when the victim of raiding is a king, a bishop, or a scribe.<sup>33</sup> The Old Irish *Table of Peniten-*

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26 Old Irish Heptad 33, ed. and tr. Roisin McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 88–9, 92–3; see also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 137–9.

27 For more on saintly vengeance, its causes, and its enactments, see Johnson, “Vengeance is Mine.”

28 §11, ed. Binchy, 5; §83, “Ancient Irish Law,” tr. MacNeill, 289.

29 §§12, 15, ed. Binchy, 5; §85, 90 (IV.312), “Ancient Irish Law,” tr. MacNeill, 289, 291.

30 *Early Irish Law*, 20.

31 §51, ed. and tr. Binchy, 40–41.

32 §39.2 *Bechbretha*, ed. and tr. Thomas Charles-Edwards and Fergus Kelly (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1983), 74–5. §22 *Bretha Nemed Toísech*, ed. and tr. Breatnach, 16–17.

33 §4.9, ed. and tr. Ludwig Bieler, *The Irish Penitentials* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Irish Studies, 1963), 170.



tial *Commutations*, on the other hand, relegates brigandage to the same category as secret murders, heresy, druidism, and satirizing as a crime for which no remission of penitential sentence can be permitted, regardless of the severity or duration of punishment.<sup>34</sup> Like the Old Irish *Table*, the *Vita S Comgalli* is in no mood to allow an opportunity for penance or the payment of honor-price.

But there is still more. Fergus is also guilty of the violation of St. Comgall's sanctuary. Vernacular Irish law dictated that a person of elevated rank possessed the right to extend his protection (*snádud* or *turtugud*) to those of equal or lesser status. Such protection could provide safe conduct or, if needed, immunity from prosecution for a period of time determined by the protector's social standing. In the ecclesiastical realm, this concept further embraced the extension of asylum.<sup>35</sup> The violation of this protection by the wounding or murder of someone under its aegis constituted a serious crime the tracts label *díguin*; such a transgression did significant injury to the protector's honor and thus entailed payment of that individual's full honor-price as penalty.<sup>36</sup> By assailing the property of nuns living under the rule of St. Comgall, Fergus has committed *díguin*, and again he should owe Comgall the full value of the holy man's offended honor.

Fergus has compiled quite the criminal dossier. He has engaged in acts of brigandage. He has refused to make the simplest degree of compensation by returning the stolen cattle. He has violated St. Comgall's protection by assailing the properties and, though it is not specified, possibly the persons of Comgall's nuns. Finally, to add the cherry to the top of this sundae of sin, he verbally abuses the holy man to his face. Seen in this light, the severity of Fergus's punishment makes rather more sense. That his penalty befalls him in one of his weakest moments strips him of his masculinity, his prowess, and his status, much as did the metamorphosis of the virile warrior-chieftain Corictic into a cowardly *vulpi-culus*. One might almost imagine the compiler of St. Comgall's *vita* snickering behind his hand as he wrote out the sarcastic cost Fergus paid for his litany of wrongs, a cost which depicts Comgall—and through him, the Irish Church—as the religious and political power that enforces Ireland's law.

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34 §5, "The Old-Irish Table of Penitential Commutations," ed. and tr. D. A. Binchy, *Ériu* 19 (1962), 58–9.

35 Binchy, *Críth Gablach*, 106–7, "*snádud*"; also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 140. For some examples of the degree of protection an individual could extend, see §§6, 7, 15 *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 2, 8; in §10, p. 5 the tract also notes that no man could offer protection to someone of greater status than himself. For the translated passages in "Ancient Irish Law," see §§66, 69, 82, 90, tr. MacNeill, 283, 284, 288, 291.

36 §§6, 11, 12 *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 2, 5 and 82–3, "*díguin*"; §§66, 83, 83, "Ancient Irish Law," tr. MacNeill, 283, 288. Also Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 141.



King Failbe Flann of Munster is another ruler whose collection of crimes results in a permanent and snarky penalty. In a *vita* of the later twelfth or thirteenth century, conflict erupts between the Tipperary saint, Mochoemóg, and Failbe Flann over what seems, at the outset, a relatively minor infraction: King Failbe orders his charioteers to pasture his horses in Mochoemóg's meadow.<sup>37</sup> In early Ireland, the act of setting one's horses to graze on someone else's land was one stage in the process of attempting to seize ownership of that property, a process called *tellach*. If the occupant drove away the horses, the process was interrupted and the interloper's claim was to be considered null.<sup>38</sup> In essence, King Failbe has laid his mark on the field currently held by St. Mochoemóg, and it is therefore not surprising that Mochoemóg wastes no time in expelling the horses—evidently with some prejudice, as he is described as driving them off the land “*aspere*” [harshly], mistreating them in the process. The saint's handling of the situation enrages (*iratus*) Failbe, who then orders that the hostages he has from Mochoemóg's region of Ely are to be killed unless the Ely chieftain and the hostages' own parents cast out the saint.<sup>39</sup>

Failbe's threat is of significant import. The hostage, or *gíall*, was usually a high-status individual entrusted by a client to a lord to mark the acknowledgment of the recipient's superior status. Any transgression of that contract could result in the hostages being bound in chains and even potentially slain. Hostages constituted a protected class in medieval Ireland as they were considered a critical component of the interpersonal ties that laced together its politically-decentralized society, and the assault or slaying of such persons without proper cause constituted an act of *díguin*. Vernacular law codes once again demand that the protector's honor-price should be due him for this transgression of his protection.<sup>40</sup> As members of the community where Mochoemóg's foundation is located, these hostages would certainly fall under the saint's protection; because the *vita* also states that Failbe had already restrained the hostages in chains (*tenebat in vinculis*), he is guilty both of assault upon them and the trans-

37 See Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 459–60 (Mochaomhóg of Leigh) for the contextual clues to the *vita*'s date. For another angle on this story, see Johnson, “In the Bursting of an Eye,” 456–9.

38 The procedures of *tellach* are laid out in detail by Thomas Charles-Edwards, “Boundaries in Irish Law,” in *Medieval Settlement: Continuity and Change*, ed. P. H. Sawyer (London: Edward Arnold, 1976), 83–7. For a general approach with additional source material, see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 109–10 (“usucaption”) and 186–7 (legal claim process), as well as Kelly, *Early Irish Farming* (Dublin: Dublin Institute for Advanced Studies, 1997), 432–3.

39 Ch. 19, *Vita S Mochoemog Abbatis de Liath Mochoemog*, ed. Plummer, II: 174.

40 §§32, 46 *Crith Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 18, 23, and 95–6 (*gíall*); §§117, 134, “Ancient Irish Law,” tr. MacNeill, 300–1, 305. Again also see Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 173–4.

gression of Mochoemóg's protection. In this light, the saint's prompt and speedy (*uelocius*) trek from his community to Failbe's court in a high state of dudgeon is understandable.<sup>41</sup>

Face to face in Cashel, the argy-bargy between the two men erupts into an all-out row. As "*irati altercantes ad inuicem*" [the irate men are arguing back and forth], King Failbe declares, "*Calve parve, tibi honor hic non dabitur; set de regno nostro eris expulsus!*" [(You) puny little bald man, you will not receive honor here, but you will be cast out of our kingdom]. Mochoemóg shouts back sarcastically: "*Si ego sum caluus, tu eris luscus!*" [If I am bald, then you will be one-eyed].<sup>42</sup> The moment the words have left the saint's mouth (*ad hanc vocem*), Failbe suffers bitter pains in his left eye and instantly (*illico*) his sight in that eye is lost. Though the king's friends plead with St. Mochoemóg to restore Failbe's eye, the holy man refuses to provide a complete cure. Instead, he observes that he will only relieve Failbe's pain, and provides an eyewash of holy water that ends the king's agonies without returning his vision.<sup>43</sup>

As seen with the reaver Fergus in St. Comgall's *vita*, King Failbe's deeds constitute a "what's-what" of things not to do as a ruler. He has made an illegal claim of *tellach* against St. Mochoemóg, a sanctified agent of the Church and of God. He has chained hostages entrusted to his care without just cause.<sup>44</sup> He has threatened to kill those same hostages in order to compel their elite families to act in his interests and against the person and rights of St. Mochoemóg. Finally, as if this itinerary were somehow in need of just one more deed to perfect its awfulness, he ends his royal temper tantrum with a rather puerile act of verbal assault against the saint. The snarky punishment that befalls him, however, does not levy the saint's honor-price or that of either the hostages or their families, though the vernacular legal tracts would declare all of these to be reasonable penalties. Instead, it strips away part of his vision and leaves him in terrible—if temporary—pain.

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41 Ch. 19 *Vita S Mochoemog*, ed. Plummer, II: 174.

42 Ch. 19 *Vita S Mochoemog*, ed. Plummer, II: 174. Admittedly one could read this as a mild observation made with the force of negative prophecy, but since the *vita* declares that they're in a furious altercation it seems safe to presume that Mochoemóg would not be uttering anything calmly at this point in the narrative.

43 Ch. 19 *Vita S Mochoemog*, ed. Plummer, II: 174.

44 In "Medicine and Miracle," I had argued that no actual act of *díguin* had occurred in this story; my comments here and in "In the Bursting of an Eye" act as a corrective to that error. In "Medicine and Miracle," I also argued for an interpretation of distraint and honor-price in the *Lives* that was based on a metaphorical stance that would not have pertained in medieval Ireland. The present essay—and that of "The Insult of Injury"—are part of the ongoing work of rectifying this mistake.

Though loss of an eye is not a mortal wound to the king's body or his life, it could be a lethal blow to his sovereignty. According to early Irish law, an individual demonstrated his right and ability to rule by a combination of his deeds and his lineage; if he was the right candidate, if he possessed the proper *fír flathemon*, or "prince's truth," the natural world responded with an outpouring of bounty. If he was not fit to hold such leadership, crops and animals under his purview would be unproductive. One way a sitting ruler could lose his status was to commit acts against the Church, something Failbe Flann has certainly proved himself adept at accomplishing.<sup>45</sup> Sovereignty could also be forfeit if a ruler failed to honor his promises—such as those made to the families of the hostages Failbe chained and threatened to slay. A king guilty of any of these wrongs could find his social status stripped away, reducing him to the level of a commoner or, potentially, with no status whatsoever.<sup>46</sup>

A ruler could also be disqualified or removed from power if, according to the legal tracts, he were to suffer an ailment or injury resulting in a permanent disfigurement. In what seems to echo the Old Testament decrees that priests should be physically perfect in order to sacrifice to God, any type of blemish in or on a candidate for leadership might indicate a lack of *fír flathemon* and therefore of honor.<sup>47</sup> Indeed, according to the Old Irish law on bees and beekeeping, *Bechbrettha*, King Congall Cáech ("the Blind") lost the sovereignty of Tara when he was blinded in one eye by bee-stings.<sup>48</sup> That St. Mochoemóg's miraculous retaliation falls upon Failbe Flann's left eye, therefore, both inflicts a painful, conspicuous, and snarky penalty and manifests on Failbe's body the outward sign of the failure of his *fír flathemon*. It marks Failbe Flann not only as literally and metaphorically blind to Mochoemóg's divinely-bestowed grace and legal rights, but also as plainly unfit to rule.

It is likely not a coincidence, then, that while Mochoemóg refuses to return Failbe's lost vision, Failbe does seek that cure from another saint, Mochutu of Lismore, whose *vita* is careful to note that Failbe "*noluit...exire causa pudicie, ne vi-*

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45 §21 *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 12–13; §§100, tr. MacNeill, "Ancient Irish Law," 295. See further Kim McCone, *Pagan Past and Christian Present in Early Irish Literature* (Maynooth: An Sagart, 1991), 124, 141, 143–4, and Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 19–20.

46 §§21, 40–41 *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 12–13, 21–2; §§100, 119–30, tr. MacNeill, "Ancient Irish Law," 295, 302–4. Also McCone, *Pagan Past*, 124 and Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 19.

47 §§38–9 *Críth Gablach*, ed. Binchy, 20–21; §124, tr. MacNeill, "Ancient Irish Law," 303.

48 §§31–2, ed. and tr. Charles-Edwards and Kelly, 68–9. But note that Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 19, observes that Congall evidently held power at Tara and Ulster at the same time. Though he did lose control of the kingship of Tara after being stung, Kelly reports, Congall retained his hold on Ulster until his death in 637 CE.

*deretur ab extraneis agminibus luscus*” [did not wish to go outside due to his shame, lest he be seen as a one-eyed man by enemy forces].<sup>49</sup> Indeed, to be observed in his half-blind condition could mean the loss of his status and his rule. Once again, the saints of Ireland’s hagiography reinforce the tenets of vernacular law without the use of the traditional honor-price structure as a mode of recompense. The saints and their sacred biographers, it would seem, were more interested in corrective punishments that actually alter a wrongdoer’s behavior or life permanently—and often wryly—and which also show forth the immanent sanctity of their holy subjects in a way no exaction of honor-price could ever accomplish.<sup>50</sup>

The incidence of sarcasm and snarkiness in the vengeance stories of Ireland’s holy men and women is not limited to the *vitae*. A narrative in the twelfth-century *betha* of St. Columba of Iona provides two separate such cases.<sup>51</sup> Here an arrogant dynast, Conall mac Aodha, incites a crowd against the saint. In the ensuing melee, twenty-seven of Columba’s monastic retinue are injured. As soon as Columba learns the identity of the man responsible for the crowd’s ugly deed, he rings his holy bell—an act of malediction—in Conall’s hearing. As the last vibration of the bell fades away, the youth’s reason fades with it. Now rendered delusional and dysfunctional, he can no longer be considered a candidate for rule; the mentally ill were dependents before the law in Ireland and had a status equal to that of a young child.<sup>52</sup> As the hagiographer notes, “*ro ben an clerech righe 7 airechus aire*” [the cleric took his kingship and sovereignty away from him].<sup>53</sup> But the penalty does not end there. In a final snarky debasement, St. Columba’s curse ensures that Conall regains his lucidity roughly once per day—but only when he is defecating.<sup>54</sup>

Once again the malefactor here, Conall, has committed quite a laundry list of crimes. The assault and injury of the twenty-seven monks in St. Columba’s reti-

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49 Ch. 61 *Vita S Carthagi sive Mochutu Episcopi de Less Mor*, ed. Plummer, I: 194–5.

50 I adopt the idea of “sacred biographer” from Thomas J. Heffernan, *Sacred Biography: Saints and their Biographers in the Middle Ages* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

51 This text has been assigned a date between 1150 and 1170, based upon both linguistic evidence and internal reference, by the text’s editor and translator, Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry: The History and Hagiography of the Monastic Familia of Columba* (Dublin: Four Courts Press, 1988), 184–93, 203. Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 213, agrees.

52 §22 *Berrad Airechta*, ed. and tr. Robin Chapman Stacey, “*Berrad Airechta: An Old-Irish Tract on Surety*,” in *Lawyers and Laymen: Studies in the History of Law Presented to Professor Dafydd Jenkins on his Seventy-Fifth Birthday*, ed. Thomas Charles-Edwards, M.E. Owens, and D. B. Walters (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1986), 213.

53 Appendix §4 *Betha Coluim Chille*, ed. and tr. Máire Herbert, *Iona, Kells, and Derry*, 244–5, 266.

54 Appendix §4 *Betha Coluim Chille*, ed. and tr. Herbert, 244–5, 266.

nue certainly may be considered an act of *díguin*, violating the saint's protection of these men. Individuals injured in a non-battle-related assault were also due the compensation of their own honor-prices, according to the early legal tracts; the percentage of the victim's honor-price assessed depended not only upon the victim's status but upon the type, location, and severity of the wounds received.<sup>55</sup> If the injuries were particularly severe the victims might be owed an additional mulct known as the *íarmbrethemnas* [after judgment], which was meant to provide restitution to a victim of such injury for their public shaming due to disfigurement.<sup>56</sup> To add yet another legal layer to this tale, Conall's actions as an inciter who instigates and celebrates violence without taking part in it directly class him in vernacular Irish law as a type of "onlooker," the *sellach láinféich*, who owes hefty penalties for his actions despite having inflicted none of the harm with his own hands.<sup>57</sup> Were Conall to be penalized according to these strictures, the economic cost would be quite high.

Yet, as with all of the examples in this study, there is no fee assessed. While the framework of what constitutes a crime according to vernacular law is upheld in the *Lives*, it is maintained through the application of saintly miracles. The "fee" which then befalls Conall so reduces this high-status youth that he experiences a clear mind only in his most humiliating pose, one which—like Fergus's demise in the marital bed—also carries with it a taint of pollution. Every time Conall relieves himself for the rest of his life, he is compelled to recall the enormity of his trespass and all that he forfeited as a consequence. Such an all-encompassing, snarky end befits the complex array of infractions he commits with a single deed.

But the story of Conall's family does not end with the erasure of his own sanity and hoped-for sovereignty. Indeed, when his mother learns that Conall has been cursed and that St. Columba has handed that sovereignty to Conall's brother, she sends a message to her husband the king that if he offers respect to that *corrclérech* she will give him no peace.<sup>58</sup> The use of *corrclérech* is an interesting moment of hagiographical word games, as it means both "stooped cleric" and

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55 This is the focus of the entire legal tract known as *Bretha Déin Chécht*, ed. and tr. Binchy.

56 §§30, 31, 34 *Bretha Déin Chécht*, ed. and tr. Binchy, 16–17, 18–19, 40–41, 44–5, and the notes on p. 63.

57 §§1–2 "Sellach-text," ed. and tr. Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 360–361.

58 The full comment is "*dia fagba in corrclerech ud cádas aga nibam sídhachso fris.*" Appendix §6 *Betha Coluim Chille*, ed. and tr. Herbert, 245, 267. On *corrclérech*, see *Dictionary of the Irish Language Based Mainly on Old and Middle Irish Materials (DIL)*, ed. and tr. E. G. Gwynn et al. (Dublin: Royal Irish Academy, 1983 ongoing), C 152, 482.58–69, 484.15. For more concerning this episode as an instance of verbal assault, see also Johnson, "Insult of Injury," 24.

“crane-like cleric”; either way, it is an insult that calls attention to a particular facet of St. Columba’s appearance. Whether it mocks the bent profile of an elderly man or the posture adopted by a monk in prayer, it constitutes a type of illegal satire for which the vernacular law codes dictate the payment of the victim’s full honor-price for defamation.<sup>59</sup> When the queen’s message reaches St. Columba, however, he pronounces that henceforth both the queen and her handmaid, with whom she has conspired, will live as cranes (*coirr*).<sup>60</sup> In so doing, Columba sends the same insult back toward those who had originated it; by adding the potency of his sanctified grace to its use, his cleverly sarcastic malediction (*escaine*) causes the two women to literally become their own satire—something the queen’s wordplay had no power to accomplish.<sup>61</sup>

A third vernacular instance of saintly snark is found in the *betha* of St. Colmán mac Lúacháin, which dates to the twelfth or thirteenth century.<sup>62</sup> Here again the hagiographical humor turns rather earthy. According to St. Colmán’s sacred biographer, an uppity ruler by the name of Áed Róin forcibly seizes the plowteam of another saint, Mocholmóg, to compel him to pay a tax he is actually exempt from owing. In an attempt to force Áed Róin to return the team or to otherwise make restitution, Mocholmóg engages in a legal practice known as *troscud* [fasting]. Medieval vernacular tracts detail elaborate procedures for gaining recompense, one of the final stages of which was the seizure of property, or distraint. A plaintiff of superior social grade could simply appropriate the belongings of an inferior defendant, but when both parties shared equal standing or the plaintiff was of lower status, the plaintiff was expected to tender notice of pending seizure to the ruler, noble, cleric, or poet who was his or her exalted opponent. When a defendant refused to respond to this notice, the plaintiff’s last chance to convince him to act before his goods were confiscated was through the prosecution of a legal fast.<sup>63</sup>

<sup>59</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 137; McLaughlin, *Early Irish Satire*, 19.

<sup>60</sup> Appendix §6 *Betha Coluim Chille*, ed. and tr. Herbert, 245, 267.

<sup>61</sup> This is also the observation made by Joseph Falaky Nagy in his discussion of satire as an oral pronouncement; see *Conversing with Angels and Ancients: Literary Myths of Medieval Ireland* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 182, 184.

<sup>62</sup> The original work possesses a colophon that suggests the text was compiled shortly after the discovery, elevation, and enshrinement of the saint’s relics in 1122; see *Betha Colmáin maic Lúacháin*, ed. and tr. Kuno Meyer (Dublin: Hodges, Figgis, and Company, 1911), vi–vii. Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 197 (Colmán of Lynn), however, notes that the extant *betha* possesses features suggestive of a somewhat later date.

<sup>63</sup> See §§8–9 of a legal fragment ed. and tr. by D. A. Binchy, “A Text on the Forms of Distraint,” *Celtica* 10 (1973): 72–86. The largest tract on *troscud* is a subsection of the *Cetharslicht Athgabála* (the four classes of distraint) 365.5–367.7, ed. D. A. Binchy, *Corpus Iuris Hibernici* (Dublin: Dublin

A defendant was supposed to respond to a plaintiff's *troscud* either by giving the proper pledges to undertake arbitration or render future compensation, or by refuting the plaintiff's charges through a counter-fast against him or her. A defendant who did none of these things before the plaintiff's vigil concluded could legally lose property, status, or both.<sup>64</sup> Mocholmóg's fast in the *betha* of Colmán mac Lúacháin goes unanswered, and Mocholmóg prophesies in turn that Áed's body will be scattered among Ireland's saints—all of his body, that is, save for his penis. The ruler mocks this forecast and demands to know which saint will hold his *membrum virile*.<sup>65</sup> Mocholmóg then makes an alliance with St. Colmán mac Lúacháin himself, and declares that it is St. Colmán who will possess Áed's royal genitalia. Colmán himself adds on the prophetic rider that it is Áed's reproductive organ that will first signal the man's demise. The next day Áed raids the kingdom in which St. Colmán's monastery lies, and Colmán assists his own ruler against Áed's foray with snarky prayer-summoned *miracula*.

Thus then, it was done; and at Faithche Mecnan Áed...was slain,  
and his people slaughtered. And wolves carried his masculine limb to  
the door of Colmán's Church, who said to them: "Carry it to be exhibited  
to [Saint] Finnén or to [Saint] Mocholmóg and to the saints of Ireland."  
Again, God's name and Colmán's were magnified by that miracle.

[Dorónad tra amlaid sin 7 romarbad Áed...7 ár a muindtíri ic Faithchi  
meic Mecnán ocus rugcsat meic tíre a ball ferda co dorus an tempuill co  
Colmán7 isbert Colmán ría: 'Ber co Finnén nó co Mocholmóc 7 co  
naemaib hÉirenn hé dia taisbenad.' Romórad dano ainm Dé 7 Colmáin  
trit an firt sin.]<sup>66</sup>

Time and again the stories of saintly sarcasm have shown that Ireland's holy men and women have a particular preference for the dismantling of masculine prowess from those who would presume to challenge their sanctified authority,

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Institute for Advanced Studies, 1978). An English translation—not always entirely reliable—can be found in *Ancient Laws of Ireland* 112.14–118.7, ed. and tr. William N. Hancock et al. (Dublin: A. Thom, 1865). For a German translation and thorough discussion of *troscud* see Rudolf Thurneysen, "Das Fasten beim Pfändungsverfahren," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 15 (1926): 260–275. D. A. Binchy's "Distraint in Irish Law," *Celtica* 10 (1973): 22–71, esp. 34–5, and Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 9, 182–3 also provide important additional analysis.

<sup>64</sup> Kelly, *Early Irish Law*, 182–3.

<sup>65</sup> The *betha*'s editor and translator, Kuno Meyer, was the first to delicately refer to the offending body part as a *membrum virile*.

<sup>66</sup> Ch. 90–91 *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin*, ed. and tr. Meyer, 92–5. "Masculine limb" is a direct translation of the phrase *ball ferda*; it is easy to see where *membrum virile* would seem a reasonable rendering.



and St. Colmán's *betha* is no exception. The prophecies of Sts. Mocholmóg and Colmán again establish that no secular power has the right to trespass into the Church's territory or prerogatives or to demand tax or tribute from an ecclesiastical foundation. That was, after all, the start of the entire dispute: Áed Róin illegally distrained Mocholmóg's plow oxen to force the saint to pay an unjust tax. Áed, however, never provided the proper response to Mocholmóg's *troscud* and, by legal definition, should be deprived of his sovereignty as a result. When recognition of his act of verbal assault in mocking the saints' prophetic declamations is added into the mix, it becomes plain that Áed has really dug his own grave. But it is not sufficient for him to simply die—he must be sarcastically ripped from the secular rule of which he is so proud. The ribald punishment inflicted upon his remains utterly annihilates the ultimate symbol of his masculinity, prowess, and status and puts it—literally—into the hands of the saints.

This episode also possesses strong correspondences to a narrative in the apocryphal *Acts of Thomas*, where again the death of a malefactor is followed by the dismemberment of his body and the carrying off of a particular body part by an animal. In the case of the apocryphon, a cupbearer has the temerity to strike the Apostle Thomas. In response, Thomas tells him, "My God will forgive you for this wrong in the world to come, but in this world he will show his wonders, and I shall soon see that hand that struck me dragged along by dogs."<sup>67</sup> Shortly thereafter, "the cupbearer that struck him came down to the fountain to draw water. And there happened to be a lion there which killed him and left him lying in the place, after tearing his limbs asunder. And dogs immediately seized his limbs, among them a black dog, which grasped his right hand in his mouth and brought it to the place of the banquet [where the Apostle was having his meal]."<sup>68</sup>

Thomas was a member of the elite group of disciples who dropped their former lives in order to follow Jesus, who believed in and witnessed to the divinity

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<sup>67</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 1:6–8, ed. and tr. Elliott, *Apocryphal New Testament*, 449–51.

<sup>68</sup> *Acts of Thomas* 1:6–8, ed. and tr. Elliott, 449–51. The only other Irish hagiographical parallel to this particular narrative of which I am aware is found in the *betha* of St. Finnian of Clonard. There, Bresal mac Muiredach's crime is the seizure and attempted expulsion of the saint, an act of physical assault combined with territorial dispute. The obliging wild assistant that returns to Finnian with the guilty hand is a hawk. See lines 2580–97 *Betha Fhindein Clúana hEiraid*, ed. and tr. Whitley Stokes, *Lives of the Saints from the Book of Lismore* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1890), 77, 224–5. This is of interest because St. Finnian (rendered as Finnén) is explicitly named among those who receive the artifact of Áed Róin's masculinity and sovereignty in the *Betha Colmáin meic Lúacháin*.



embodied in Jesus as the anointed of God.<sup>69</sup> Sts. Colmán mac Lúacháin and Mo-cholmóg are, by extension, figured as intensely faithful servants of God who attest to the identity of the Messiah and wield an authority bestowed upon them due to the depth of their belief; in addition, they possess the ability to work miracles and the authority to determine who belongs in or must be cast from the community of Christ in Ireland.<sup>70</sup> In essence, these saints are made true apostles of the Lord. The miraculous and snarky seizure of Áed Róin's private bits, then, manifests the judgment that Áed is no true king, upholds the tenets of Ireland's legal codes from a distinctly ecclesiastical stance, and establishes the hagiographers' view that the real authority in early Ireland belonged to the saints and the Church foundations they represented, not to the secular leaders who otherwise attempted to claim it.

A final episode from the late-twelfth-century *vita* of St. Coemgen of Glendalough is worth considering.<sup>71</sup> Here what initially appears to be snarky humor lacks the multitude of wrongs as well as the more debasing components so common to hagiographical sarcasm. As a result, the tale demonstrates a relatively straightforward, non-sarcastic, biblically-inspired punishment. In the narrative, word comes to the saint that a *miles* [soldier] named Rotán has become rather too fond of his long and abundant locks, and that he spends his time primping rather than attending to the care of his own soul.<sup>72</sup> St. Coemgen, *displacuit* [displeased] by this news, blesses some water, which he then sends to the soldier with instructions that the vain fellow should use it to wash his fine hair in order to gain a blessing. As soon as Rotán does so, every single follicle drops from his scalp. Shocked, the newly smooth-pated man goes to the saint and performs a full penance. His soul cleansed, Rotán then receives a blessing from Coemgen that instantly restores his curls. However, the text is careful to observe, Rotán's new head of hair, while certainly lovely, is not *quite* as attractive as it had been before.<sup>73</sup>

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**69** See for instance Matt. 10:3 (Mark 3:18, Luke 6:15) and John 11:16, where Thomas is named among the other disciples.

**70** See again Matthew 10:1 (Mark 6:7, Luke 9:1) for Jesus's bestowal of the ability to work miracles upon the disciples.

**71** On the date of Coemgen's *vita*, see Ó Riain, *Dictionary*, 149, which provides a summary of some of the scholarship and reasons to see the text as later rather than, as some have suggested, an eighth-century work with successive editions.

**72** This warrior (*miles*) is given the name of *Rotanus* in the *vita*. *DIL* 103.53 suggests that Rotán, or Rodán, means something like "reddish brown," which may refer to the soldier's hair color.

**73** Ch. 41 *Vita S Coemgeni Abbatis de Glenn da Loch*, ed. Plummer, I: 254.

The primary message here is much less about the saint's status than it is about the sin of vanity and its ability to distract an individual from the proper spiritual care. The warning that physical beauty is of much less importance than the immortal afterlife is common to the *Lives*; quite often, however, it is used to describe the subjects of these texts, a *topos* meant to emphasize the saints' humility and lack of worldliness. Brigit's eighth-century<sup>74</sup> *Vita I*, for instance, observes that Brigit prefers "*magis...oculum perdere corporis quam oculum animae*" [to lose her corporal eye rather than the eye of her soul]. St. Coemgen's balding head rinse essentially accomplishes the same ends; for the vain Rotán, his hair is the threat to his soul. In keeping with the gospel decree that pieces of anatomy capable of risking an individual's access heaven should be excised, Rotán's miraculous depilation severs from his body what will, if not eradicated, pollute his entire afterlife.<sup>75</sup> The restoration of his follicles to a level just shy of their prior glory continues Rotán's protection, preventing him from being beguiled by vanity yet again. His new locks also proclaim that his penitential sentence has been satisfied, and manifest the power of penance to not only heal the individual believer's soul but to return the entire Irish Christian community to full integrity.

It is worth noting that the saint's status, while no longer the dominant theme, still has a place in the tale. William Sayers has observed that early Irish saga possesses a number of references to the act of trimming or cutting a youth's hair as a way of ritually marking his entry into a relationship of fosterage; the "ritual" essentially declares that the one who performs the cutting has taken on the duties inherent to fostering the one who is receiving the trim.<sup>76</sup> The length or style of hair may also have indicated a person's family or status, so that cropped or shaven hair could indicate a slave or servile position.<sup>77</sup> Additionally, it seems that warrior hairstyles in general were expected to possess some length, though portions might be kept shaven or short; some evidence even

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74 The *Vita I S Brigitae*, is one of those texts the date of which remains a chronic source of debate and academic irritation. The main arguments center around whether this text precedes or follows upon the later-seventh-century *Vita S Brigitae* of Cogitosus. Most of the field of scholarship appears to be leaning toward the view that the *Vita I* is the later of the two works. My own view of the evidence leads me to agree with the view that the *Vita I S Brigitae* most likely was compiled in either the mid- or the later 700s. See Máire Johnson, "The *Vita I S Brigitae* and *De Duodecim Abusiis Saeculi*," *Studia Celtica Fennica* 9 (December 2012): 22–35, esp. 22–23 and 34–35.

75 Matt. 5:29–30.

76 "Early Irish Attitudes toward Hair and Beards, Baldness and Tonsure," *Zeitschrift für celtische Philologie* 44 (1991): 154–89; see 159, e.g.

77 Sayers, "Early Irish Attitudes toward Hair," 164, 173, 188.

suggests that “youths unfit for warrior status were not permitted to wear their hair long.”<sup>78</sup> Indeed, non-genetic baldness was apparently a mark of shame, and several legal tracts specifically address offenses against either hair or the head on which it grows.<sup>79</sup>

If these components are also woven into the story of St. Coemgen and the vain warrior, the transformation of Rotán’s head into the semblance of a cue ball might well be a hagiographical claim upon the man’s standing. By stripping Rotán of his crowning glory, Coemgen’s punishment certainly erases the cause of the man’s sin and compels a reconsideration of his life choices; that reconsideration, however, may be accentuated by the abrupt reduction in status that his smooth pate signifies. As a visual representation of Rotán’s sin and shame, and possibly his new identity as a servant or foster-son to Coemgen, the man’s freshly-bald head serves—as do all of the other miraculous penalties of this study—to identify the real authority in early Ireland: the saint and, by extension, the Church for whom he speaks.

Indeed, this narrative from St. Coemgen’s *vita* emphasizes the importance of confession, penance, and mercy in a way that is utterly absent from the other instances outlined above, and it is that tone—in combination with both the lack of multi-level criminal activity and the clear biblical message of shedding what taints one’s soul—that disqualifies the story from really fitting into the pattern of saintly snark, despite its inherent humor. In cases of sarcastic vengeance, there is no room offered for penitential satisfaction. St. Patrick’s opponent, Corictic, and the queen who mocks St. Columba are both transformed into creatures that would have been understood as lacking the ability either to speak or to reason. Without the faculty of speech, an individual cannot properly confess or satisfy penance; without the ability to reason, it is not possible to understand the nature of one’s sin or how to rectify it. On the other hand, the brigand Fergus who crosses words with St. Comgall, and the ruler Áed Róin who violates the rights and status of Sts. Mocholmóg and Colmán mac Lúacháin, both receive capital punishments.

Only in the cases of King Failbe Flann, St. Mochoemóg’s opponent, and the inciting dynast Conall mac Aodha in the *betha* of St. Columba might there have been an opportunity for penitential satisfaction, but even here that does not occur. Conall’s guilt in instigating a riot that injures twenty-seven monks leaves him only able to reason sufficiently enough to understand the nature of his crimes once a day—or thereabouts—but as soon as he steps away from his latrine

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<sup>78</sup> Sayers, “Early Irish Attitudes toward Hair,” 165. See also 174–6 for additional examples.

<sup>79</sup> Sayers, “Early Irish Attitudes toward Hair,” 174–5.

he is again insensate and thus cannot ever properly confess or do penance. Failbe Flann, for his part, does beseech St. Mochoemóg for a merciful remittance, but Mochoemóg relieves only Failbe's ocular agonies and not his partial blindness, and it is another saint who provides Failbe with the cure he so desperately desires. The punishment each man suffers, then, forces him to completely deviate from his previous life and marks him as outside the usual community of Irish Christians. In essence, Failbe and Conall have so wronged their respective saints that, at least within the confines of a single *Life*, they cannot possibly cleanse their souls sufficiently with an ordinary penitential regimen. Instead they must be outwardly and inwardly signed with the visible declaration of their guilt and, living thus as incomplete individuals in a permanent penitential state, can only hope (when circumstances allow) that doing so will expiate their sins by the time they reach death.<sup>80</sup>

In the end, these episodes paint the saints of Ireland at their earthiest and most humorous, but they also leave absolutely no doubt as to who wielded the real power, at least in the saints' *Lives*. In the hands of the holy Irish, the power of snarky punishment reinforces Ireland's legal tenets without the application of the traditional fee-based compensation. It defines the line between membership in and exclusion from the community of the faithful, all while declaring the saints the recipients of a potent miraculous grace capable of punishing those who would dare to challenge either their authority or that of the God whom they represent.

Indeed, in weaving both ecclesiastical and secular power into the literary persons of the sanctified, the framers of Ireland's medieval saints' *Lives* also seem to claim that it is the Church—through her agents, the saints—that functions as the unifying power otherwise lacking in Ireland's decentralized society. As a result, the saint's *Life* is more than just the panegyric of a particular holy individual, it is also a contract. It details the expected mutual obligations between the Irish Church and Irish society, and it uses the language of sarcasm and ironic debasement to reinforce the proper maintenance of those obligations with the art of the Irish curse.

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<sup>80</sup> For more on permanent penitential states in early Ireland, see Colmán Etchingham, *Church Organisation in Ireland AD 650 to 1000* (Maynooth: Laigin, 2002), 295–317.

Jeremy Farrell  
**Comic Authority**

Sarcasm in Pre-modern Arabic Literature

The discussion of sarcasm, with which this essay is primarily concerned, should begin with its relation to comedy. Although neither is descended directly from the other, they are nevertheless inextricably related.<sup>1</sup> If, as is contended, a sarcastic speech act need not first and foremost concern the humorous, it does exhibit a conspicuous ability to divide an audience into two camps: those who locate in it a pleasing comic truth, and those who find it “so funny they forgot to laugh.” This contentious quality has long stood at the fore of studies of “comedy” or “humor” in Islamicate contexts.<sup>2</sup> Charles Pellat, the influential French scholar of the genre of *adab* (frequently defined as *belles-lettres*), portrayed comedy as locked in a status conflict within Islamicate circles of literary production. This clash pitted the scholarly Islamic sciences such as law or Qur’anic interpretation against humor, which, being restricted from inclusion in momentous literary ventures, “fell into the lap of folklore.”<sup>3</sup> Joseph Sadan, the author of a num-

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1 John Haiman, *Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 21–22. For the Arabic literary tradition, Georges Tamer remarks, “This human phenomenon [viz. humor] cannot be separated from other related phenomena of the comic sphere, such as irony, sarcasm, and cynicism”: Tamer, “Introduction,” in *Humor in der arabischen Kultur/Humor in Arabic Culture*, ed. Georges Tamer (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2009), ix.

2 This term was coined by the late Marshall Hodgson, and is used to denote those cultural phenomena which “refer not directly to the religion, Islam, itself, but to the social and cultural complex historically associated with Islam and the Muslims, both among Muslims themselves and even when found among non-Muslims”: Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam*, 3 vols. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), 1:59. This definition allows for the consideration of works in Arabic produced by Christian and Jewish communities, and the possibility of trans-confessional readership.

3 Charles Pellat, “Seriousness and Humour in Early Islam (*al-jidd wa’l-hazl fī ṣadr al-Islām*),” *Islamic Studies* 2.3 (1963), 353–362, here 359. Cf. the argument of Franz Rosenthal that there are three types of pre-modern Islamic jokes—“political”, “religious”, and “middle class”—and that, “political humor [...] whenever it arose, was destined to die soon, and religious humor

ber of important works on pre-modern Arabic comic literature, has remarked that those authors who “resorted to various styles of joking” (*laja’ū ilā shattā asālībī l-muzāh*) did so to shake off and poke fun at the restrictions imposed upon them by life at the imperial courts of the Umayyads (re. 661–750 CE) and ‘Abbasids (re. 750–1258).<sup>4</sup> More recent studies have drawn attention to the ways by which both modern and pre-modern Islamicate authors constructed rhetorical models of national, regional, or economic superiority through comedy, yet leave untouched Pellat and Sadan’s essential separation of the “comic” and the “serious” literary voices, and the subordination of the former to the latter.<sup>5</sup> An important critique against this essentialization of comedy as an independently siloed genre or mode in Arabic literary ventures has been articulated in a recent article by Ze’ev Maghen.<sup>6</sup> Therein, he describes the centrality of comic anecdotes within the genre of *ḥadīth*, that entirely Arabic corpus of the recorded actions of the Prophet Muḥammad (d. Medina, 632) and his closest Companions (*ṣahābah*), the emulation of whom has long been a matter of utmost gravity to all Muslims. Extending Maghen’s argument to other genres of pre-modern Arabic literature, I propose to show that the separability of the comic and the serious does not match pre-modern Arabophones’ own instantiation of the concepts with respect to sarcasm.

Pre-modern literary audiences recognized the symbiotic relationship between comedy and seriousness in different modes of speech, and debate over which mode was to be preferred was common amongst littérateurs. Perhaps the most charged discussions in Arabic centered around the relationship of “earnestness” (*jidd*) to “jest” (*ḥazl*). As shown by G.J.H. van Gelder (taking up Pellat and Sadan’s initial forays into the matter), the opinions of pre-modern literary tastemakers on the appropriate balance between the two modes of speech proliferated and over-

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never regained any true life”: Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam* with an introduction by G.J.H. van Gelder (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2011 [1956]), 43.

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Sadan (Yūsuf Sadān), *Al-Adab al-‘Arabī al-Hāzil wa-Nawādir al-Thuqalā’* [La littérature arabe humoristique et les anecdotes sur les lourdauds] (Cologne: Manshūrāt al-Jamal, 2007 [1983]), 49 f.

<sup>5</sup> For modern Arab conceptions of race, ethnicity, and nationality as used in jokes, see: Devin J. Stewart, “Humor,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Arab Culture*, ed. Dwight Reynolds (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 224–248. The topic of pre-modern Iranian regional invective is treated in Dominic Parviz Brookshaw, “Have you heard the one about the man from Qazvin? Regionalist humor in the works of Ubayd-i Zākānī,” in *Ruse and Wit: The Humorous in Arabic, Persian, and Turkish Narrative*, ed. Dominic Parviz Brookshaw (Boston: Ilex Foundation, 2012), 44–83.

<sup>6</sup> Ze’ev Maghen, “The Merry Men of Medina: Comedy and Humanity in the early days of Islam,” *Der Islam* 83 (2008), 277–340.

whelmingly “allowed or even demanded a judicious mixture of jest and earnest.”<sup>7</sup> Despite the antithetical denotations of these terms authors at times conflated them in an attempt to avoid one being misread for the other; as the renowned early-ʿAbbasid-era poet Abū Tammām (d. Mosul, 845) declared, “The *hazl* of passion is *jidd*.”<sup>8</sup> Most frequently, authors achieved this conflation by subordinating jest to earnestness, but sometimes the difficulty of affirming a distinction caused the artifice to collapse; as one anonymous commentator claimed, “Passion’s *hazl* is *jidd*, its *jidd hazl*.”<sup>9</sup> To respond to instances of semantic extension new categories of criticism were created, albeit infrequently used. One *recherché* technical term as defined by the critic Ibn Abī Iṣḥāʿ (d. Cairo, 1256) is “jesting with a serious purport” (*hazlun yurādu bihi l-jidd*): “[This] is when someone intends to praise or blame a person, and this intention is expressed as a pleasant jest, or delightful shamelessness (*mujūn*), in the way of [famous pranksters].”<sup>10</sup> Ibn Abī Iṣḥāʿ goes on to contrast this with a similarly rare term, *tahakkum*, which van Gelder renders as “sarcasm”: “The difference between *tahakkum* and *hazlun yurādu bihi l-jidd* is that in the former the apparent meaning (*ẓāhiruhu*) is serious and the hidden meaning (*bāṭinuhu*) jesting, whereas in the latter the apparent meaning is jestful and the hidden meaning serious.”<sup>11</sup>

If one accepts van Gelder’s translation, Ibn Abī Iṣḥāʿ appears to define sarcasm as a speech act that can be interpreted as semantically earnest, while at the

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7 G.J.H. van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature, Part 1,” *Journal of Arabic Literature* 23.2 (1992), 83–108, here 85; and van Gelder, “Part 2,” 169–190. For Pellat’s works, see: “Seriousness and Humor” and “al-Djidd wa-ʿl-hazl,” *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*, eds. P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1960–2007); henceforth *EL2*. Cf. Sadan’s contention that all mixtures of *jidd* and *hazl* should result in an “equilibrium” (*tawāzun*) between the “trivial” (*al-tāfīh*) and the “enthraling” (*al-rānī*), on the level of the sentence (*jumlaḥ*), the section (*faṣl*), and the work as a whole (*al-Adab al-ʿArabī al-Hāzil*, 39–48). James E. Montgomery has identified the study of the contrapuntal dynamic between *jidd* and *hazl* as, “one of the foundational paradigms informing the European study of classical Islam”; see Montgomery, “Abū Nuwās, The Justified Sinner?” *Oriens* 39 (2011), 75–164, here 93.

8 Van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 1,” 88 n. 19.

9 Van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 1,” 88 n. 20.

10 Van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 2,” 180–181, n. 133–136. The other critic who mentioned *tahakkum* is the poet-caliph Ibn Muʿtazz (d. Baghdad, 908). For a study of these “famous pranksters,” see: Rosenthal, *Humor in Early Islam*, *op. cit.*

11 Van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 2,” 181 n. 137. Cf. the title of a section on lexicography entitled, *faṣḥun fī l-lafẓi yuṭlaqu wa-l-murādu bihi ḡhayru ẓāhirihi* [“concerning an unmoored statement, in which what is intended is not its apparent meaning”]), in Abū Bakr ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Dalāʾil al-lʾjāz fī ʿilm al-Maʿānī*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākīr (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Madani, 1413/1992), 66.



same time making accessible some comic critique. Yaḥyā ibn Ḥamzah al-ʿAlawī (d. Yemen, 1344 or 1348) picked up this point not quite a century later, and articulated two types of *tahakkum*:

Al-wajhu l-awwalu huwa an yakūna wāridan ʿalā jihati l-waʿdi bi-lafẓi l-waʿidi wa-l-wajhu l-thānī huwa an tūrada šifātu l-madḥi wa-l-maqṣūdu biḥā l-dhamm.

[The first type of *tahakkum* is that which occurs in the manner of a promise (i.e., “a true statement”) and takes the literal form of a threat. In the second type praiseworthy characteristics are adduced, but the meaning intended by them is condemnation.]<sup>12</sup>

These two invocations of *tahakkum* mark the most extensive technical discussion in pre-modern Arabic literature of what is today termed sarcasm.<sup>13</sup> Perhaps as a

<sup>12</sup> Yaḥyā ibn Ḥamzah al-ʿAlawī, *Kitāb al-Ṭirāz*, 3 vols. (Cairo: Maṭbaʿat al-Muqtaṭaf, 1333/1915), 3:162.

<sup>13</sup> Alexander Key has recently identified a potentially more expansive discussion of the concept of *tahakkum* in a unicum manuscript of a work by al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. Baghdad, 1108), which unfortunately remains unpublished. Key’s summary of the contents (3.3.4) reads, “*istaʿmāl al-lafẓ ʿalā al-tahakkum* [The use of a locution in the interest of sarcasm]. Sarcasm, for example in reply to an image of praise”: Key, “Language and Literature in al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī,” in *Reflections on Knowledge and Language in Middle Eastern Societies*, eds. Bruno de Nicola, Yonatan Mendel, and Husain Qutbuddin (Istanbul: Dil ve Siyaset, 2010), 32–62, here 51. A promising lead in the work of Yūsuf ibn Abī Bakr Sakkākī (d. Khwārizm [Uzbekistan], 1229) falls flat. He defines *tahakkum* as the mere substitution of one word in an antonymic pair for the other (*aḥadu l-ḥiddayni aw al-naqḍayni li-l-ākhir*) in order to change meaning, but does not introduce an aspect of negative judgment, *apud*. Aḥmad Dhiyāb ʿAnānzah, *Uṣlub al-Tahakkum fī al-Qurʾān al-Karīm. Dirāsah Taḥlīliyah Bayāniyah* (Amman: Kulliyat al-Dirāsāt al-ʿUlyā bi-Jāmiʿat al-Urdun, 2005), 8–9. A much later invocation by Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Ṣabbān (d. Cairo, 1206/1792) cannot be considered here, but is in partial agreement with the definitions of Ibn Abī ʿIsbāʿ and al-ʿAlawī, as he states, “*tahakkum* entails the choice to aggrandize the target of sarcasm” (*wa-l-tahakkumu yastalzimu intiḳāʿa taʿzīmi l-mutahakkami bihi*): Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī al-Ṣabbān, *Ḥāshiyat al-Ṣabbān ʿalā Sharḥ al-Ushmūnī ʿalā Alfīyat Ibn Mālik wa-maʿahu Sharḥ al-Shawāhid li-l-ʿAynī*, ed. Tāḥā ʿAbd al-Raʿūf Saʿd, 4 vols. (Cairo: Maktabat al-Tawfiqīyah, N.D.), 3:150, *bāb ʿatf al-nasaq*, *apud*. Ahyaf Sinnū, Jirār Jihāmī, and Hibat Shibārū Sinnū (eds.), s.v., “*tahakkum*,” in *Mawsūʿat Muṣṭalaḥāt al-ʿUlūm al-Naḥwīyah*, 3 vols. (Beirut: Maktabat Lubnān Nāshirun, 2010), 1:2015. As regards general surveys, Gustave E. von Grunebaum offers marginal references to *tahakkum*: von Grunebaum, “The Concept of Plagiarism in Arabic Theory,” *Journal of Near Eastern Studies* 3.4 (1944), 234–253, here, 239 n. 50. C. Vidal and M. Wahba define *tahakkum* as “moquerie/mockery, derision, gibe,” but offer no discussion of its use amongst pre-modern critics: Vidal and Wahba, “Contribution à l’étude du vocabulaire arabe de la critique littéraire,” *Arabica* 17.1 (1970), 3–46, here 42 [40]. *Tahakkum* is otherwise translated as “irony” in a study which tends more toward modern concepts in Shākir ʿAbd al-Ḥamid, *Al-Fukāḥah wa-l-Ḍaḥik: Ruʾyah Jadīdah* (Kuwait: ʿĀlam al-Maʿrifah, 2003), 99–120, *apud*. Ibrahim Geris, “Vers une nou-



result of this early terminological scarcity, much scholarship in European languages recognizes sarcasm in Arabic literature only in modern works. Roger Allen, a leading scholar in the field of Arabic literature, counts only the Lebanese educator, critic, and author Maroun Abboud (Mārūn ‘Abbūd; d. Beirut, 1962), the Egyptian satirical playwright and essayist ‘Alī Sālīm (d. Cairo, 2015), and the Iraqi poet Muẓaffar al-Nawwāb (b. Baghdad, 1934) as practitioners of sarcasm.<sup>14</sup> The sole mention of sarcasm in the *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature* is reserved for the contemporary Lebanese novelist, essayist, literary critic and journalist Elias Khoury (b. Achrafieh [Lebanon], 1968).<sup>15</sup> Undoubtedly, one is frustrated by a lack of data with which to identify sarcasm in the pre-modern Islamic corpus. In a study of modern Iranian satire, Katja Föllmer cautions that pre-modern Arabic and Persian poetry furnishes, “many examples of the author adding no extra explanation so that the uninitiated reader is ‘left in the dark’ (*im Unklaren gelassen wird*),” as to the author’s sincerity.<sup>16</sup> Compounding this difficulty, most verbal cues such as pitch modulation or syllable elongation in textual traces of sarcasm have been obliterated.<sup>17</sup> Neither are modern graphical conventions of indicating sarcasm such as italics (“This movie is *amazing*”) or scare quotes (“Your ‘expertise’ is not needed in this matter”) of any help given that such notations were never used in the pre-printing press era of Arabic literary production.

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velle lecture de la *Risāla* attribuée à Sahl b. Hārūn par al-Ġāḥiẓ,” *Arabica* 60 (2013), 58–105, here 73 n. 66.

14 Roger Allen, *The Arabic Literary Heritage: The Development of Its Genres and Criticism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005 [1998]), 156, 402, 343.

15 M.T. Amyuni, s.v., “Khūrī, Ilyās (Elias Khoury),” in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, eds. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey, 2 vols. (London & New York: Routledge Taylor & Francis, 2010 [1998]), 2:447.

16 Katja Föllmer, *Satire in Iran von 1990 bis 2000: eine Analyse exemplarischer Texte* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2008), 59–60.

17 Haiman, *Talk is Cheap*, 80–100; Patricia Rockwell, “Lower, Slower, Louder: Vocal Clues of Sarcasm,” *Journal of Psycholinguistic Research* 29.5 (2000): 483–495. A promising corpus for reconstructing such linguistic data is Middle Arabic. Over the last 35 years the term has come to be used more frequently in academic descriptions of the development of the Arabic language from the idiolects of individual pre-Islamic poets and the Qur’an to the modern dialects. See Joshua Blau, *A Handbook of Early Middle Arabic* (Jerusalem: Max Schloessinger Memorial Foundation of the University of Jerusalem, 2002). One might also consult the works in which are discussed the “malapropisms of the common people” (*laḥn al-‘āmmah*), in which the both the uneducated and highly cultured are harangued for their lack of linguistic command. For a general study of this genre, see Ramaḍān ‘Abd al-Tawwāb, *Laḥn al-‘Āmmah wa-l-Taṭawwur al-Lughawī* (Cairo: Maktabat Zahrā’ al-Sharq, 2000).

This ambiguity of authorial intent, and the limited means available to clarify it, has important consequences for those who would claim to identify sarcasm in pre-modern Arabic literature. At present, the existence of sarcasm in this corpus depends on the identification of elements which exist independently of a given speech act. In its simplest form, this analytical technique applies modern tastes to the pre-modern author's style, producing an idiosyncratic judgment.<sup>18</sup> For instance, P.J.E. Cachia deems that a series of "dramatic monologues" by the highly regarded stylist Abū 'Alā' al-Ma'arrī (d. Ma'arrat al-Nu'mān [Syria], 1057) exhibit, "the heavy sarcasm [...that] may be expected of an adolescent."<sup>19</sup> Jean-Claude Vadet, in discussing the satirical picaresque narratives (*maqāmāt*)<sup>20</sup> of Aḥmad ibn Abī Bakr al-Rāzī al-Ḥanafī (d. Aleppo, 1267), eschews the image of a pouty teenager by portraying a strand of sarcasm more terrifying still: "[Al-Ḥanafī's *maqāmāt*] reflect an attitude of denigration and *sarcasm*, the controlled and systematic violence of which surprises the reader."<sup>21</sup> Even the more nuanced assess-

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**18** This analytical difficulty is described in the field of linguistics concerned with subjectivity and "predicates of personal taste" (e.g., "That joke was hilarious."): Peter Laserson, "Context Dependence, Disagreement, and Predicates of Personal Taste," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 28.6 (2005): 643–686; Tamina Stephenson, "Judge Dependence, Epistemic Modals, and Predicates of Personal Taste," *Linguistics and Philosophy* 30.4 (2008): 487–525. I thank Carlos Balhana for bringing these references to my attention.

**19** P.J.E. Cachia, "The Dramatic Monologues of al-Ma'arrī," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 1 (1970): 129–136, here 136. The "dramatic monologues" in question constitute a minor collection of al-Ma'arrī's poetry entitled "The Arrows of Calumny" (*Siqt al-Zand*): al-Ma'arrī, *Siqt al-Zand wa-Ḍaw'uhu*, ed. Al-Sa'id al-Sayyid (Cairo: Ma'had al-Makhṭūṭāt al-'Arabiyyah, 2003). For an alternative perspective on allusion in another work by al-Ma'arrī, see: Pieter Smoor, "Enigmatic Allusion and Double Meaning in Ma'arrī's Newly-Discovered 'Letter of a Horse and a Mule': Part 1," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 12 (1981): 49–73; Smoor, "Part 2," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 13 (1982): 23–52.

**20** James T. Monroe, *The Art of Badī' az-Zamān al-Hamadhānī as Picaresque Narrative* (Beirut: Center for Arab and Middle East Studies at the American University of Beirut, 1983), 17–18. For an objection to the implicit comparison between European picaresque novels and the *maqāmāt* genre, see Abdelfattah Kilito, "Fī al-Mirāt," in *Lan Tatakallim Tatakalli Lughatī* (Beirut: Dār al-Ṭalī'ah, 2002), 10–26; Kilito, "In the Mirror," in *Thou Shalt Not Speak My Language*, trans. Wail S. Hassan (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2008), 6–20.

**21** Claude Vadet, s.v., "Ibn Nākiyā," *EL2*. In this entry Vadet has misattributed the work; so too, Stefan Wild, "Die zehnte Maqame des Ibn Nākiyā. Eine Burleske aus Baghdad," in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner zum 65. Geburtstag*, eds. Wolfhart Heinrichs and Gregor Schoeler, 2 vols., Beirut: Texte und Studien Band 54 (Beirut: Franz Steiner, 1994), 2:427–438. The correction to this false attribution is given two, near simultaneous, studies: Devin J. Stewart, "The Maqāmāt of Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. Aḥmad al-Rāzī al-Ḥanafī and the Ideology of the Counter-Crusade in Twelfth-century Syria," *Middle Eastern Literatures: Incorporating Edebiyat* 11.2 (2008), 211–232, here 212; G.J.H. van Gelder, "Fools and Rogues in Discourse and Disguise: Two Studies," in *Sensibilities*

ment of the presence of sarcasm in a pre-modern work makes clear the potential for retrojected value judgments. This point can be focused in an examination of the relative gustatory worth of the dish *sikbāj*: “a vinegar- and flour-based meat stew or broth cooked with vegetables, fruits, spices and date-juice,” that was commonly served in the ‘Abbasid period.<sup>22</sup> Shawkat Toorawa notes that “sarcasm often accompanies” mention of this fare, but not always. Namely, Toorawa accepts as straightforward the claim by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (d. Baghdad, 1071) that *sikbāj* is most delicious when served with eggplant, but rejects as sarcastic the counter-proposition of ‘Alī al-Ṭālaqānī (d. Baghdad, 1021) that *sikbāj* with “cow’s anus” is a delicacy.

This verdict in turn forces us to consider the question: Why lend credence to one expression of taste and not the other? What is there to dissuade us from thinking that al-Ṭālaqānī’s claim was perfectly serious, and that he jumped at every opportunity to sink his teeth into cow anus, other than our own, culturally conditioned, revulsion at the thought?<sup>23</sup> For Toorawa, the final determination as to sarcastic intent is made on the basis that the reference to a cow’s anus is allusive, and should be taken as a somewhat puzzling gloss for an idiomatic expression for an “arrogant man.”<sup>24</sup> The superiority of Toorawa’s corroboration of his reading with outside material to the patronizing dismissal of two accomplished exponents of the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition as childish or violent is obvious. Yet in spite of this new point of reference the reader is still left with only an unsatisfying indication as to why a contemporary of al-Ṭālaqānī

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of the Islamic Mediterranean: Self-Expression in a Muslim Culture from Post-classical Times to the Present Day, ed. Robin Ostle (London: I.B. Tauris, 2008), 27–58, here 55 n. 63.

<sup>22</sup> Shawkat M. Toorawah, s.v., “Sikbadj,” *EI2*.

<sup>23</sup> Neither temporal nor geographic difference seems to have lessened the appeal or prestige of some intestine-based dishes. Tunisians serve “cous cous bel osbane,” featuring the stuffed lower intestine of a freshly slaughtered sheep, on *ʿīd al-adḥā*, the major religious celebration of the Islamic lunar calendar. Haggis is a well-known, non-Arab parallel.

<sup>24</sup> The reference to a cow’s anus might better be understood if rendered less literally as the English idiomatic expression, “a horse’s ass.” This particular phrase may refer to eating in the company of a “party crasher” (literally, a “lichen” or a “sponger”; *ṭufaylī*): one who sought out parties and banquets to which he was not invited. Working against this explanation is the fact that al-Ṭālaqānī surely was aware the *ṭufaylīs*’ comic potential, and would be expected to exploit the trope for his audience. For examples, see: al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Al-Tatfīl wa-Ḥikāyāt al-Ṭufaylīyīn*, ed. Kāzīm Muẓaffar (Najaf: al-Maktabah al-Ḥaydariyah, 1966); Ulrich Marzolph, *Arabia ridens, Die humoristische Kurzprosa der frühen adab-Literature im internationalen Traditionsgeflecht*, 2 vols. (Frankfurt am Main: Klostermann, 1992), *infra*. Those unfamiliar with the delights of the Arabic may refer to the excellent translation of selections from the former in Al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, *Selections from the Art of Party Crashing in Medieval Iraq*, translated from the Arabic and illustrated by Emily Selove (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2012).

may have received this remark as sarcastic in the way we understand the term. Clearly, it would be preferable to have more sustained critical discussion of sarcasm or access to the allusions and registers of pre-modern Islamicate speech communities so rarely preserved in textual form in order to better analyze these speech acts. Be that as it may, previous efforts to describe the pre-modern appearance of and attitudes toward sarcasm assess with little formality the information we do possess.

The present attempt to provide an exposition of sarcasm in the pre-modern Arabic literary tradition necessarily connects the questions of authority and systematization referred to above. In recognition that the size of the corpus as well as the variegation of terminology employed by pre-modern authors of Islamicate societies strain any claims in regards to both, a concession must be made to establishing strong parameters for this investigation. In light of the contingent attempts to identify sarcasm in pre-modern Arabic literature, there is a clear need for a method for reading sarcastic speech acts that are preserved only in text. The model proposed herein engages the recent attempt by Elisabeth Camp to bridge the divide in the field of linguistics over the nature of the phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> In assessing the Arabic terminology used by pre-modern authors and critics to identify sarcasm, van Gelder is correct to discuss *tahakkum* as one of several technical terms used to identify the phenomenon. However, the response to sarcasm by pre-modern Islamicate readership was only obliquely conditioned by a lengthy discussion of technical terms. Instead, it can be demonstrated that the audience of these texts identified the combination of the voice with which a speech act is performed and the adherence to generic conventions as the key factors for accepting a textually preserved speech act as sarcastic. Using this hermeneutic enables the identification of at least three pre-modern genres of Arabic literature which exhibit the features of sarcasm, or in which examples were specifically located: revelation, as described in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*); biography or its sub-genre prosopography, in which works are composed of historical anecdotes (*akh-bār*, sg. *khbar*); and poetry, specifically the sub-genre of satirical invective (*hijā'*). The concluding remarks offer a tentative thesis as to why sarcasm was not widely discussed despite its recognition as a mode of speech.

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25 Elisabeth Camp, "Sarcasm, Pretense, and The Semantics/Pragmatics Distinction," *Noûs* 46.4 (2012), 587–634.

## Reading Sarcasm: The Problem of Speech and para-textual Evidence

The attentive reader will object that I have thus far avoided specifying what I mean by sarcasm. As is also the case with comedy writ large, the articulation of a universal definition has proven elusive yet desirable.<sup>26</sup> To properly undertake this challenge, a number of concerns need to be addressed. I offer here a systematic method for analyzing sarcastic remarks in texts to avoid adding to the irreproducible or purely subjective claims that are highlighted above. This method accounts for remarks stripped of the context clues that someone who is addressed verbally relies on to make such a determination, and enumerates some key concepts and terms related to identifying sarcasm in Arabic texts.

Sarcasm is foremost a restricted case of verbal irony, an allusive use of language. Verbal irony is, in turn, a speech act which identifies an is/ought dichotomy. Unlike situational irony, in which several elements are understood as juxtaposed by circumstance, verbal irony operates by what John L. Austin first termed “illocution”: the performance of intention and the acceptance of the performance’s consequences.<sup>27</sup> This understanding bears a strong relation to the principle of *tahakkum* articulated by Ibn Abī Iṣba‘, in which the outward meaning of a speech act appears to be serious while the intention conveys and commits to a comic critique. Working from these propositions, Elisabeth Camp has attempted to harmonize competing analytical approaches of how best to judge the nature of a speaker’s illocutionary commitment to the is/ought discrepancy.<sup>28</sup> Camp synthesizes the notions of verbal irony and illocution in order to produce “a workable analysis of sarcasm”: “Sarcasm [...] is speech which [1] presupposes a *normative scale*, which [2] *pretends* to undertake (or at least, evokes) a commit-

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26 See, *inter alia*, the attempt to adduce a structuralist model of humor in Fedwa Malti-Douglas, “Humor and Structure in Two ‘Buḥalā’ Anecdotes: al-Ġaḥiẓ and al-Ḥaṭīb al-Baġdādī,” *Arabica* 27.3 (1980), 300–323, here 300–308.

27 The concept was first proposed in John L. Austin, *How To Do Things With Words* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1975), 116 f. Austin’s categories of illocutionary acts have been criticized in John R. Searle and Daniel Vanderveken, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985). For an overview of the current models of illocutionary force, see: Mitchell Green, s.v., “Speech Acts, 3: Aspects of Illocutionary Force,” *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta (Summer 2015 edition), <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2015/entries/speech-acts/>. On the issue of pre-modern theories of intention in Arabic speech, see Almog Kasher, “Two Types of *Taqdīr*? A Study of Ibn Hišām’s Concept of ‘Speaker’s Intention’,” *Arabica* 56 (2009): 360–380.

28 Camp labels the two parties of the dispute as “semanticists” (“Sarcasm,” 589–592), and those whom she labels “expressivists” (“Sarcasm,” 593–603).

ment with respect to this scale; and which thereby [3] communicates an *inversion* of this pretended (evoked) commitment.”<sup>29</sup>

Camp highlights three additions to existing definitions of sarcasm which deserve mention, and which closely parallel al-ʿAlawī’s notion of *tahakkum*. She denies the prevalent notion that sarcasm involves stating “the opposite” of what is meant and instead requires that sarcasm enact an “inversion” of meaning.<sup>30</sup> This can be seen in the phrase, “What a shame you missed out on the party.” This speech act does not necessarily imply that the speaker’s intent is to express “the opposite” of what she said; i.e., that the speaker wishes the addressee *had* attended the party. Rather, the illocution might convey that the speaker is mean-spiritedly addressing a person who was not invited to the party in the first place. Following this, Camp rightly points out that sarcasm conveys a judgment which is almost certain to be negative.<sup>31</sup> Any number of examples might illustrate this point, such as Toorawa’s reading of al-Ṭālaqānī’s preference for *sikbāj* above, but another will suffice. When a dog’s owner scolds a rambunctious toddler by saying, “I’m sure the dog loves it when you pull his tail,” there can be no doubt as to his sarcastic intent. The illocutionary force of this statement serves to indicate indirectly that the owner disapproves of the child’s behavior. Finally, Camp notes that the illocutionary power of sarcastic speech acts must be disguised in order to be effective; that is to say, they must be interpretable both as genuine and as insincere.<sup>32</sup> Speech acts which cannot perform this semantic double duty no longer serve as sarcasm. If al-Ṭālaqānī had simply intoned, “Never eat *sikbāj* with cow’s anus,” then the force of illocution has transformed into pure imperative, in effect erasing the divide between what should be and what is.

An additional observation might lend further support to Camp’s arguments: the speakers in all of these instances unambiguously consider themselves to be speaking from a position of legitimate, albeit relative, superiority or authority. The party-goer can look down upon the addressee because of the prestige the invitation affords her. The child does not formally possess the same rights over the dog as the owner, who in turn objects to having his property touched. Al-Ṭālaqānī is clearly a connoisseur of *sikbāj*, having eaten it many times over. In each of these contexts, however, the speaker’s claim to offer an authoritative judgment is neither unique nor unimpeachable, but competes with an imagined or previously articulated claim from an opposing party. We have already seen

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<sup>29</sup> Camp, “Sarcasm,” 605. Emphasis in the original.

<sup>30</sup> Camp, “Sarcasm,” 588, 603–620.

<sup>31</sup> Camp, “Sarcasm,” 594.

<sup>32</sup> Camp, “Sarcasm,” 605 n. 28.

that al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī, contrary to al-Ṭālaqānī, championed the eggplant as the noblest ingredient in *sikbāj*. Relatedly, the uninvited addressee might respond to the partygoer that she was on an extravagant vacation at the time of the party, and could not possibly have attended such a low-brow affair even if she had been on the guest list. The child, or a guardian acting on her behalf, could assert that her intentions were harmless and, besides, the dog didn't seem to mind. Thus the most successful sarcastic speech act carefully anticipates the target's claims to authority so as to neutralize them in an attempt to "manipulate the common ground" on which the assumption of a shared norm rests, a strategy which Camp notes, "carries significant rhetorical advantages for the speaker, when it works."<sup>33</sup>

In spite of these positive advancements in developing a methodology for identifying sarcasm, two important objections can be raised against Camp's claims to the universality of her scheme. First, Camp depends on data that is almost completely auditory; she exclusively refers to a "hearer" (never a "reader") when discussing the examples. She contends that this hearer, "appears to associate a distinctive *tone* with sarcasm—roughly slow rate, exaggeratedly modulated stress and nazalization" (emphasis mine); the addressee might also respond to visual cues, such as a "sneer."<sup>34</sup> As noted above, in pre-modern cases where the only data is textual these cues rarely exist or are impossible to observe reliably. Furthermore, the order of the analysis that Camp proposes is not a fixed matter but depends on the frame of reference in relation to a speech act. When considering the phrase, "Your plan sounds fantastic," as sarcastic Camp describes the analytical operation as follows: "The speaker merely [2] *pretends* to make an assertion or other speech act, but she thereby genuinely [1] *presupposes* some standard of evaluation, and also [3] *implicates* that this standard has been violated and that she feels negatively about its violation."<sup>35</sup>

This point is not merely a question of rigor, but of the effect of perspective on the possibility of recognizing sarcasm. In Camp's scheme, the speaker operates in the logical order [1]-[2]-[3], but the addressee is forced to analyze the statement as [2]-[1]-[3]. Considering this speech act only as text and lacking certain background information on the speech actor, the addressee has no means to ascertain whether the speech act genuinely invokes a normative scale or if it merely "pretends" to do so, as Camp suggests. In text, without the testimony of intonation, body language, and other "para-speech" allusions, Camp's schema returns

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<sup>33</sup> Camp, "Sarcasm," 605.

<sup>34</sup> Camp, "Sarcasm," 587 n. 1, 591.

<sup>35</sup> Camp, "Sarcasm," 605. Emphasis in the original.



us to the same problem encountered in *sikbāj* served with cow's anus: the reader cannot deduce sarcasm from the information given, and must search out or invent references, however tenuously related, to form a conclusion.

These objections notwithstanding, it is not necessary or useful to invalidate the operative components of sarcasm that Camp has set forth, and to which an important suggestion was added above. To address these shortcomings one must formulate a more inclusive schema of sarcasm, one which modifies Camp's model slightly. Above all, this reformulation should allow for the isolation of different types of information available to the addressee or reader, from which she can construct a determination about genuine or sarcastic intent. To reformulate Camp's contentions, sarcastic speech acts should be split into two stages: a "preverbal" formulation by the speaker, which corresponds to operation [1] in Camp's definition; and an "expressed" formulation addressed to an audience, which corresponds to operations [2] and [3]. It should be noted that the components of the preverbal stage are still considered to be operative in the expressed stage. According to this reformulation, I offer the following operational model:

- (1) In its preverbal phase, sarcasm constitutes (a) a negative illocutionary judgment in which (b) the speaker/writer asserts authority relative to (c) a shared standard between herself and an addressee. (2) When expressed, this judgment constitutes a speech act that is (d) semantically coded as genuine, but can be (e) differentiated by the addressee (f) according to context clues as a case of (g) "inversion" of the speech act's genuine coding, not necessarily its "opposite".

To be viable, this reformulation must exhibit a degree of universality yet remain sufficiently flexible to respond to particular expectations for sarcastic speech acts. In regard to spoken instances of sarcasm, the suggested reformulation supports Camp's claim to unifying the arguments of semanticists, who find their arguments represented in (1), and the "expressionists", who find their arguments represented in (2). Most importantly, it separates the information available to the addressee or reader, and emphasizes (f), those non-lexical factors which prove to be decisive for the audience in differentiating the genuine and sarcastic coding of the speech act that is preserved only in text.

The success of the application of this model for textual instances of sarcasm is conditioned on defining new criteria which take the place of sensory cues to provide context. Since all possible sarcastic speech acts of pre-modern Arabic literature are only available in texts, they must be identified as sarcastic via "para-textual" elements, here meaning additional aspects of the speech act be-



yond mere lexical choice.<sup>36</sup> Pre-modern audiences are thought to have conducted literary analysis of this order; as Andras Hamori suggests, “medieval readers [of Arabic] looked for clear significations, not ambiguities,” and that, “a good reader observed evident forms of congruence and consequently also noted subtler ones.”<sup>37</sup> In view of this assumption, it is contended that pre-modern Islamicate readerships recognized sarcasm based on the coincidence of two para-textual elements: the voice used by the speaker to perform the speech act, and the conformity of the speech act with established generic conventions. In each of these categories, the reader recognized two further possibilities. When considering a speaker’s mood, readers distinguished between the discourse of a single speaker and instances of reported speech or “echoes”<sup>38</sup> which appear internally consistent but reveal an underlying contradiction. Furthermore, the audience corroborates any trace of sarcasm by assessing to what degree the author adheres to generic conventions or violates them; this latter designation was recognized as parody in both prose and poetry.<sup>39</sup> These features will be more fully discussed in relation to individual works, below.

If the consideration of voice and genre primarily guided the reader’s attention to the presence of sarcasm, what of lexical choice? Were there not certain flag words or key phrases which alerted the reader to a lurking sarcastic remark? These questions hint at both the nature of sarcastic expression itself and of Arabic semantics specifically. The first of these issues can be addressed easily enough. Verbal irony occurring within speech acts is perhaps entirely unbounded, and cannot be confined to a finite set of lexical juxtapositions. Even if it is admitted that sarcasm, being a restricted case of verbal irony, has a finite number of manifestations, it seems unlikely that humanity will ever exhaust its supply of negative opinions or cease doing so sarcastically. It is also important to consider semantic drift, in which technical terms acquire over time different

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36 Compare James E. Montgomery’s specific invocation of Gerard Genette’s notion of “paratextual” in Montgomery, “*Al-Jāhīz on jest and earnest*,” in *Humor in der arabischen Kultur/Humor in Arabic Culture*, 209–241, here 211.

37 Andras Hamori, “Did Medieval Readers Make Sense of Form?: Notes on a Passage of al-Iskāfi,” in *In Quest of an Islamic Humanism. Arabic and Islamic Studies in Memory of Mohamed al-Nowaihi*, ed. A.H. Green (Cairo: The American University in Cairo Press, 1984), 39–47, here 47 n. 26, 43.

38 Camp briefly touches upon the relevance of indirect reported speech to sarcasm: *eadem*, “Sarcasm,” 591.

39 For prose: Daniel Beaumont, “Parody and Lying in al-Bukhala’,” *Studia Islamica* 79 (1994): 27–49. For poetry: Julie Scott Meisami, “Abū Nuwās and the Rhetoric of Parody,” in *Festschrift Ewald Wagner*, op. cit., 2:246–257; Sinan Antoon, *The Poetics of the Obscene in pre-modern Arabic Poetry: Ibn Ḥajjāj and Sukhf* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 45–63.

meanings. One such case presents itself in the consideration of *sukhrīyah*, which historically indicated an instance of mockery, but is today a widely accepted technical term for irony. Multiple volumes have been written on the premise that one of the finest stylists of pre-modern Arabic literature ‘Amr ibn Baḥr, commonly known as al-Jāḥiẓ (literally, “Popeye”; d. Baghdad, 868), mastered *sukhrīyah* as mockery.<sup>40</sup> However, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to class him as a systematizer of “irony” in the modern sense, since he did not even acknowledge *sukhrīyah* as a literary device in his masterwork on rhetoric, *The Treatise on Clarity and Clarification* (*Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn*).<sup>41</sup>

These issues notwithstanding, the Arabic language itself presents a special difficulty for identifying sarcasm. The semantic variety of Arabic is daunting, and restricting oneself to the use of a single word to exclusively define a concept has proven difficult, if not fallacious. Many common concepts were expressed by a number of terms with equal validity, although one or another of them may have gained precedence of usage over time. This state of affairs accords with what George Steiner has termed a “contingent lexicon.”<sup>42</sup> One need look no further than the subject of jest, translated above by *hazl*, to illustrate the concept. We have already seen that it was a concept with “fuzzy edges,”<sup>43</sup> and susceptible

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40 Nash‘at al-‘Anānī, *Fann al-Sukhrīyah fī Adab al-Jāḥiẓ* (Cairo: Maṭba‘at al-Sa‘ādah, 1980); al-Sayyid ‘Abd al-Ḥalīm Muḥammad Ḥusayn, *Al-Sukhrīyah fī Adab al-Jāḥiẓ* (Tripoli, Libya: Dār al-Jamāhurīyah, 1988); Rābiḥ al-‘Awbī, *Fann al-Sukhrīyah fī Adab al-Jāḥiẓ min khilāl Kitāb al-Tarbī‘ wa-l-Tadwīr wa-l-Bukhalā’ wa-l-Ḥayawān* (Algiers: N.P., 1989).

41 On the absence of *sukhrīyah* as a critical term in the works of al-Jāḥiẓ see al-Shāhid al-Būshaykhī, *Muṣṭalahāt Naqadiyah wa-Balāghīyah fī Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn li-l-Jāḥiẓ* (Beirut: Dār al-Āfāq al-Jadīdah, N.D.), 7–10, Index. Presumably because of this absence James E. Montgomery, in his consideration of al-Jāḥiẓ’s theory of the natural phenomenon of speech as expressed in *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-Tabyīn*, specifically declines to address “the extent of [al-Jāḥiẓ’s use of] irony”: Montgomery, “Speech and Nature: al-Jāḥiẓ, *Kitāb al-Bayān wa-l-tabyīn*, 2.175–207, Part 1,” *Middle Eastern Literatures* 11.2 (2008): 169–191, here 171. He does, however, argue persuasively for the possibility of ironic readings of the “Jāḥiẓian corpus” in a later work: Montgomery, “Al-Jāḥiẓ on jest and earnest,” 234 f. It appears that there were also dangers associated with making oneself *too* clear, as argued by Pieter Smoor, “A Suspicion of Excessive Frankness,” in *The Rude, the Bad and the Bawdy: Essays in honour of Professor Geert Jan van Gelder*, eds. Adam Talib, Marlé Hammond and Arie Schippers (London: The E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2014), 24–65.

42 George Steiner, *After Babel: Aspects of Language and Translation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998 [1975]), 324. For a persuasive argument of the applicability of this concept to the terminology of Islamic sainthood, see Vincent J. Cornell, “Translating Sainthood,” in *The Wiley-Blackwell Companion to Islamic Spirituality* (forthcoming).

43 Van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 1,” 87. Cf. Camp’s contention that we should accept “some rough and ragged boundaries” when analyzing sarcasm: *eadem*, “Sarcasm,” 604. For another example of the ambiguities inherent in technical rhetorical terms, see Erez Naaman,

to semantic extension according to the writer's individual taste. Although over time *hazl* became and remained the preferred technical term for discussing comic topics, no one made the claim that this word alone represented the concept of comedy. Pre-modern authors instead employed a variety of close synonyms for it, including *du'ābah*, *fukāhah*, *mujn*, and *muzāḥ*, with practical interchangeability.<sup>44</sup> This same variegation can be seen in topics ranging from personal comportment to literary theory. Remaining close to the subject of the comic, lexicographers disagreed vehemently over the difference between a “laugh” and a “smile” (*ḍaḥik*, *tabassum*, *ibtisāmah*), and what to call the teeth one showed when doing one or the other (e.g., *anyāb*, *ḍawāḥik*, *nawājīdh*, *thanāyā*).<sup>45</sup> Even a concept in which a modern audience finds almost no ambiguity, such as plagiarism (*sariqah*, or *sirqah*), was parsed by authorities on Arabic stylistics into no fewer than twenty-one categories by the beginning of the twelfth century.<sup>46</sup> In spite of this terminological proliferation, according to the explanation of the critic Ibn Rashīq al-Qayrawānī (d. Māzar [Mazzara, Sicily], 1071), many of these sub-divisions were completely indistinguishable. G.E. von Grunebaum has offered a summary of some of Ibn Rashīq's comments on this issue: “*iṣṭirāf* (appropriation by a later poet of a verse which he likes); *ijtilāb* (the same with respect to a *mathal*, proverbial saying); *istilhāq* (a synonym of *ijtilāb*); *intihāl* (the distinction between *intihāl* and *iṣṭirāf* if any be intended remains unclear).”<sup>47</sup>

From these examples it seems evident that in seeking to define a given concept pre-modern Arabic authors, lexicographers, and critics resorted not to an individual lexical unit but to a more or less wide semantic field. From a survey

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“Women Who Cough and Men Who Hunt: Taboo and Euphemism (*kināya*) in the Medieval Islamic World,” *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 133.3 (2013): 467–493.

<sup>44</sup> This interchangeability is evident in the opening section of Abū al-Barakāt al-Ghazzī (d. Damascus, 1499), *Al-Murāḥ fī al-Muzāḥ*, ed. al-Sayyid al-Jamīlī (Cairo: Maktabat al-Thaqāfah al-Dīniyah, 1406/1986), 3.

<sup>45</sup> See the excellent analysis of this subject in Maghen, “Merry Men,” 298–313.

<sup>46</sup> Von Grunebaum, “Plagiarism,” 237–241. More recent and wide-ranging studies of poetic plagiarism in Arabic include: Badawī Aḥmad Ṭabbānah, *Al-Sariqāt al-Adabiyah: Dirāsah fī Ibtikār al-A'māl al-Adabiyah wa-Taqlīdihā* (Beirut: Nahḍat Miṣr, 1410/1990 [1389/1969]); Muḥammad ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *Dirāsah ḥawla al-Sariqāt al-Adabiyah wa-Mākhadh al-Mutanabbī fī al-Qarn al-Rābi’* (Cairo: Dār al-Ṭibā‘ah al-Muḥammadiyah, 1404/1984); ‘Abd al-Razzāq Bilāl, *Jadaliyat al-Ta’āluq al-Naṣṣi bayna al-Sariqāt al-Adabiyah wa-l-Tanāṣṣ: Muqārabah Iṣṭilāḥiyah* (Fez: Dār Mā Ba‘da al-Ḥidāthah, 2009). The plagiarism debate in prose raged well into the fifteenth century: Frédéric Bauden, “Maqriziana IX: Should al-Maqrīzī Be Thrown Out with the Bath Water? The Question of His Plagiarism of al-Awḥadī's *Khīṭaṭ* and the Documentary Evidence,” *Mamluk Studies Review* 14 (2010): 159–232.

<sup>47</sup> Von Grunebaum, “Plagiarism,” op. cit., 238–239.

of critical and lexicographical literature a cluster of words with semantic valences of sarcasm emerges: *sukhrīyah* as the widest sense of “ironic mocking,”<sup>48</sup> in addition to the potentially more narrowly defined *tahakkum* and *istihzā*. In some cases the terms are recognized as being so close in meaning that they are redundantly defined by each other: Ibn Athīr (d. Mosul, 1233) equated the verbal noun *istihzā* with *tahakkum*<sup>49</sup>; the verbs *sakhira* and *hazi’a* (from which *sukhrīyah* and *istihzā* are derived) were in turn classed as exact synonyms by the most frequently cited later authority Ibn Manẓūr (d. Cairo, 1311).<sup>50</sup> Even when the lexicographer Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī (d. Baghdad, ca. 1005) differentiated *sukhrīyah* from *ishtihzā*, he had to split hairs finely: “A person is mocked with *istihzā*’ (*al-insānu yustahza’u bihi*) before having done anything that he might be mocked for. But the mocking of *sukhrīyah* indicates an action which precedes that person’s being mocked.”<sup>51</sup> Crucially, it can be shown that pre-modern authors utilized the plasticity of these terms to concretely identify a sarcastic speech act, or that one of the concepts was operative in the reception of a sarcastic text.

## Sarcasm in the Arabic Literary Heritage

Following the parameters outlined above, it is possible to identify three genres in Arabic literature in which a speech act was encoded so as to be recognizable to a pre-modern audience as sarcastic: revelation, in the form of the Qur’anic exegesis (*tafsīr*); biographical anecdotes (*akhbār*); and poetry, in the form of invective satire (*hijā*). The relationship of each of these genres to the designation of the author’s voice, the means of recognizing sarcasm, and conformity to convention can be visualized in the following chart:

48 Manah al-Ṣulḥ, *Al-Sukhrīyah fī al-Nathr al-‘Arabī min al-Jāhiliyyah ḥattā al-Qarn al-Rābi’ al-Hijrī* (PhD. Diss., American University of Beirut Faculty of Arabic, 1953), 3–28; Nu’mān Muḥammad Amīn Ṭāhā, *Al-Sukhrīyah fī al-Adab al-‘Arabī ḥattā Nihāyat al-Qarn al-Rābi’ al-Hijrī* (Cairo: Dār al-Tawfiqiyah, 1398/1978).

49 Ibn al-Athīr, *Al-Nihāyah fī Gharīb al-Ḥadīth wa-l-Athar*, eds. Ṭāhir al-Zāwī and Muḥammad al-Ṭabbākhī, 5 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Fikr, 1979), 5:278.

50 Edward William Lane and Stanley Lane-Poole, *An Arabic-English Lexicon*, 10 vols. with Supplements (New York: F. Ungar Publishing Co., 1955–56 [London: Williams & Norgate, 1868]), 1324; Ibn Manẓūr, s.v., “s-kh-r,” *Lisān al-‘Arab* (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā’ al-Turāth al-‘Arabī, 1999), 1963.

51 Abū Hilāl al-‘Askarī, *Mu’jam al-Furūq al-Lughawīyah*, ed. Bayt Allāh al-Bayyāt (Qum: Mu’assasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī al-Ṭābi’ah li-Jāmi’at al-Mudarrisīn, 1412/1991), 50, no. 176.

Genre	Authorial Voice	Indication of Sarcasm
Revelation (Qur'anic exegesis)	Single Speaker	Technical term ( <i>tahakkum</i> )
Biographical anecdotes ( <i>akhbār</i> )	Reported Speech	Technical term ( <i>istihzā'</i> )
Poetry ( <i>hiǰā'</i> )	Single Speaker	Broken conventions ( <i>madh</i> )

### The Qur'an

God, or a direct agent such as the angel Gabriel (*Jibrīl*), is the main speaker in the text of the Qur'an but the voice of the transcendent is not monotone.<sup>52</sup> When speaking, God uses a variety of forms of discourse (*khiṭāb*) according to the addressee. This variety allowed lexicographers and exegetes (*mufasssirūn*, sg. *mufasssir*) to expound theories of divine speech. The most prestigious of God's speech acts, a "discourse of nobility" (*khiṭāb al-karāmah*), is reserved for those whom God favors. This form of discourse is most evident in addressing Muḥammad as "the Prophet" (*yā ayyuhā l-nabī*; e.g., Q 8:65, 66, 70). Other addresses are more neutral, but still evince an illocutionary force. This is especially the case with oaths, which might first invoke the majesty of celestial objects, and then address a human audience; for example (Q 86:1–2): "By the Sky and the Night-Visitant [*tāriq*] (therein), And what will explain to thee what the Night-Visitant is?"<sup>53</sup> Still other forms of address in the Qur'an evince mockery through situational irony, in which illocutionary force is provided by God's omniscience. The most frequently used verb (or its nominal derivations) to denote this state of affairs is *sakhira*, which appears thirty-one times; *hazi'a* or its derivations appear less frequently, only fifteen times. The two are juxtaposed when God describes the ultimate perdition of nonbelievers (Q 6:10; 21:41): "And already were messengers ridiculed (*ustuhzi'a*) before you, but those who mocked them (*sakhirū minhum*) were enveloped by that which they used to ridicule (*yastahzi'ūna*)."

While this amounts to a scripturally-sanctioned condemnation of ridiculing the faithful, it also presents positive evidence for exegetes that revelation and irony could be closely linked. Indeed, the formal argument that ironic *sukhrīyah*

52 Rosalind Ward Gwynne, "Patterns of Address," in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qur'an*, ed. Andrew Rippin (London: John Wiley & Sons, 2008), 73–87. The view that it is only God who is speaking in the Qur'an appears not always to have been unanimous: Gerhard Böwering, "The Origin of the Qur'an as the Voice of God," *Proceedings of the American Philosophical Society*, *Philadelphia* 147 (2004): 347–353.

53 All translations of the Qur'anic text are taken from that of Abdullah Yusuf Ali (New York: Alavi Foundation, 2000), unless otherwise noted.

serves as a major rhetorical device in the Qur'an has been accepted by Muslim and non-Muslim scholars alike.<sup>54</sup> The following verses, in which God addresses an unspecified party of disbelievers, evince a textbook example of the principle (Q 23:109–111): “Indeed, there was a party of My servants who said, ‘Our Lord, we have believed, so forgive us and have mercy upon us, and You are the best of the merciful.’ But you [i.e., unbelievers] took them in mockery (*fa-ittakhadhtu-mūhum sukhriyan*) to the point that they made you forget My remembrance, and you used to laugh at them. Indeed, I have rewarded them this Day for their patient endurance—that they are the attainers [of success].”

Modern studies have less frequently but no less successfully argued that the Qur'an exhibits the discourse of sarcasm (*tahakkum*).<sup>55</sup> Their claim is supported by the fact that at least three prominent exegetes directly tied the concept of *tahakkum* to instances in the Qur'an in which God's speech can be dually interpreted in regard to the description of the inhabitants of hell.<sup>56</sup> In light of God's addressing both the damned and the saved with identical titles or offering them similar recompense, these exegetes evidently thought it necessary to delineate which of the two offers was genuine by declaring one sarcastic. One exegete who invoked *khiṭāb al-tahakkum* was Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī (d. Niebla [Spain], 1047), in his development of a formal system to analyze Qur'anic modes of discourse in his *Approaching the Limit of Logic* (*Al-Taqrīb li-Ḥadd al-Manṭiq*).<sup>57</sup> In Ibn

54 Al-Jurjānī, *Dalā'il al-I'jāz*, 325; 'Abd al-Ḥalīm Ḥifnī, *Uslūb al-Sukhriyah fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Cairo: al-Ḥay'ah al-Miṣriyah al-'Āmah li-l-Kitāb, 1978); Bashshār Muḥammad al-Maṣārwah, *Uslūb al-Istihzā' fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm: Dirāsah Bayāniyah* ('Ammān: Wazārat al-Thaqāfah, 2012). See also the perceptive comments in Claude Gilliot, “Review: Georges Tamer (éd.) *Humor in der arabischedn Kultur/Humor in Arabic culture* [...],” *Arabica* 57 (2010): 499–505, here 503.

55 Sa'd al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Jizāwī, *Uslūb al-Tahakkum fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm wa-Atharūhu fī Munāṣarat al-Da'wah al-Islāmiyah* (Cairo: Al-Sharikah al-Miṣriyah li-l-Ṭibā'ah wa-l-Nashr, 1379/1960); Fāyiz 'Arif al-Qar'ān, “Uslūb al-tahakkum fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm,” in *Buḥūth 'Arabīyah Muḥdāt ilā al-Duktūr Maḥmūd al-Samrah*, eds. Ḥusayn 'Aṭwan and Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Ḥuward (Amman: Dār al-Manāhij, 1996); 'Anāzah, *Uslūb al-Tahakkum fī al-Qur'ān al-Karīm*, op. cit.

56 For a detailed study of the variability of the concept of hell according to the earlier author al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī (d. Baghdad, 1108), see Devin J. Stewart, “Poetic License and the Qur'anic Names of Hell: The Treatment of Cognate Substitution in al-Rāghib al-Iṣfahānī's Qur'anic Lexicon,” in *The Meaning of the Word: Lexicology and Qur'anic Exegesis*, ed. S.R. Burge (Oxford: Oxford University Press in association with The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2015), 195–253. For wider-ranging perspectives on Islamic notions of hell, see Christian Lange (ed.), *Locating Hell in Islamic Traditions* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2015).

57 Ibn Ḥazm, *Al-Taqrīb li-Ḥadd al-Manṭiq wa-l-Madkhal ilayhi bi-l-Alfāz al-'Āmiyah wa-l-Amthāl al-Fiḥriyah* (Beirut: Dār Maktabat al-Ḥāyiyah, 1900), 40. This mention of *tahakkum* has inexplic-

Ḥazm's scheme the discourse of sarcasm reflects the fact that God addresses those consigned to hell and on whose heads God has poured boiling water with the words (Q 44:49): "Taste thou [this]! Truly [you are] mighty, full of honor ('*azīz*)!" The confounding factor in this statement appears to be the use and meaning of '*azīz*'. The word appears one hundred times in the Qur'an, but this is the only case in which God employs it outside of the discourse of *karāmah* (e.g., the address to Muḥammad in Q 2:129). This anomaly, Ibn Ḥazm tells his reader, can only be explained by considering God's speech as an instance of sarcasm. Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī (d. Cairo, 1505), a prolific author and late exponent of the classical exegetical tradition, does not directly cite Ibn Ḥazm for his own formulation, but adduces the exact Qur'anic verse and uses the same technical term and argument to describe God's sarcasm.<sup>58</sup>

In a seemingly less convincing case, Badr al-Dīn al-Zarkashī al-Miṣrī (d. Damascus, 1341) finds similar grounds for identifying sarcasm elsewhere in the Qur'an (Q 56). Al-Zarkashī claims God evinces *khiṭāb al-tahakkum* in addressing the hell-bound, who are "offered the hospitality of bitter fruit and boiling water [verses 54–56, 93], the shade of black smoke [42–3], and the warmth of hellfire [94]."<sup>59</sup> However, this description of the literal and figurative fruits of one's earthly actions might appear to be doubly coded. Earlier in the revelation, God offers similar "hospitality" to the inhabitants of heaven (Q 56:28–32): "They will be among the Lote-trees without thorns, among *ṭalḥ* trees with flowers (or fruits) piled one above another, in shade long extended, by water flowing constantly, and fruit in abundance." Although the negative denotations of the bitter fruit, smoky shade, and scalding water of hell may seem clear to the modern reader, al-Zarkashī seems to have viewed them as misleadingly similar to the genuine paradisaical articles awaiting the righteous. Thus, his interpretation reassures the reader that hell is indeed filled with terrible things, and that God's offer to the accursed was sarcastic after all.

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cably been changed to *qism* in a later edition: Ibn Ḥazm, *Rasā'il Ibn Ḥazm al-Andalusī*, ed. Iḥsān 'Abbās, 4 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-'Ibād, 1959), 4:138.

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Muḥammad Fārūq al-Nabhān, *Al-Madkhal ilā 'Ulūm al-Qur'ān al-Karīm* (Aleppo: Dār 'Ālam al-Qur'ān, 1426/2005), 247.

<sup>59</sup> Gwynne, "Patterns of Address," 79.



**Biographical Anecdotes (*akhbār*)<sup>60</sup>**

One of the major achievements of the Islamicate historiography was the collection and systematization of vast amounts of information concerning particular locations or persons whether great, insignificant, or of dubious historical authenticity.<sup>61</sup> The reports (*akhbār* sg. *khbar*) concerning individuals were exploited by two distinct camps of biographers who were active as early as the end of the seventh century CE: those whom Michael Cooperson terms *akhbārīs*, who were the first to appear, and *ḥadīth*-biographers.<sup>62</sup> Both groups were intimately concerned with preserving the legacy of Muḥammad and his Companions. *Ḥadīth*<sup>63</sup>, already referred to above, are generally understood to be the body of reports about Muḥammad's life as described by his Companions, while *akhbār* might also include a wider variety of persons including those who predated Muḥammad and the Companions, those who were not close enough to Muḥammad to be considered a Companion, or those who significantly postdated both groups.

In using the *khbar* as the basic unit of their biographical pursuits, both *akhbārīs* and *ḥadīth*-transmitters relied on reported speech. Alongside textually transmitted biographies, the oral dissemination of the *khbar* continued well into the late pre-modern period; the doomsday preacher (*wā'iz*) was a particularly well-known figure in this endeavor. One exponent of this oral tradition,

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**60** Michael Cooperson restricts the definition to simply “historical reports” but I think that “anecdotes” as used here better conveys the sense of their more developed exploitation: Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography: Heirs of the Prophets in the Age of al-Ma'mūn* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), xix.

**61** Representative studies include: Franz Rosenthal, *A History of Muslim Historiography*, Second edition (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1968); Akram Ḍiyā' al-'Umarī, *Dirāsāt Ta'rīkhiyah ma'a Ta'līqah fī Minhaj al-Baḥth wa-Taḥqīq al-Makḥṭūṭāt*, Al-Majlis al-'Ilmī: Iḥyā' al-Turāth al-Islāmī XI (Medina: Al-Jāmi'ah al-Islāmiyah, 1403/1983); Claude Cahen, “L'historiographie arabe: des origines au VII s. H.,” *Arabica* 33.2 (1986), 133–198; Tarif Khalidi, *Arabic Historical Thought in the Classical Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Chase Robinson, *Islamic Historiography* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003); Aziz Al-Azmeh, *The Times of History: Universal Topics in Islamic Historiography*, Past Incorporated: CEU Studies in The Humanities IV (Budapest and New York: Central European University Press, 2007). The fictive element in this endeavor is recognized in Stefan Leder (ed.), *Story-telling in the Framework of Non-Fictional Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1998); Philip F. Kennedy (ed.), *On Fiction and adab in Medieval Arabic Literature* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 2005); Robert Hoyland, “History, Fiction, and Authorship in the First Centuries of Islam,” in *Writing and Representation in Medieval Islam: Muslim Horizons*, ed. Julia Bray (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2005), 16–46.

**62** Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 4f.

**63** The plural is properly *aḥādīth*, but the singular is conventionally used to denote both an individual report and the genre as a whole.



Shu‘ayb (or ‘Ubayd?) al-Ḥurayfush (d. Cairo, 1398–99), in a fire-and-brimstone sermon quoted the Prophet Muḥammad as saying (Berkey’s translation), “No one passes amongst the tombs but their inhabitants cry out, ‘O careless one! If only you knew what we know: your skin and bones will dissolve as does ice in a fire!’”<sup>64</sup> Ḥadīth-biographers accepted the use of a *khabar* to preserve the reported speech of the Prophet and his Companions, but sought to differentiate themselves from *akhbārīs* like al-Hurayfush. To achieve this aim, they articulated a further formal stipulation for the *khabar*. In addition to the biographical information or narration given in the *khabar* itself, ḥadīth-transmitters furnished a list of everyone involved in its transmission. This para-textual device, known as an *isnād* (literally, “support”), instantiates a chain of reported speech acts stretching from the person with whom the account originated to the present recounter.<sup>65</sup> An exemplary ḥadīth, similar to the *khabar* of Hurayfush in that Muḥammad indicates his esoteric knowledge, was recorded in a public lesson (*majlis*) given by Ja‘far ibn Muḥammad ibn Nuṣayr al-Khulḍī (d. Baghdad, 959); it demonstrates an unbroken chain of reported speech acts stretching more than three centuries:

[Ja‘far al-Khulḍī] heard (*ḥaddathanā*) Ibrāhīm ibn ‘Abd Allāh ibn Muslim al-Baṣrī report that he heard Muslim ibn Ibrāhīm report that he heard al-Rabī‘ ibn Muslim report that he heard Muḥammad ibn Ziyād cite the authority of (‘*an*) Abū Hurayrah, who said:

“The Prophet left a group of his Companions (*kharaja ‘an raḥṭin min aṣḥābihi*) while they were talking and laughing. He said, ‘By the One in Whose hand I am—If you knew what I knew, then you would laugh little and cry much.’ When he departed God sent him inspiration (*awḥā llāhu ilayhi*)—‘Muḥammad! Do not make my servants despair (*lā tuqanniṭ ‘ibādī*).’ And so he returned to them and said, ‘Rejoice, draw near, and be at ease (*wa-saddidū*)!’”<sup>66</sup>

The most important sub-genre of biographical reported speech to emerge from the *akhbārī* tradition was “collective biography”, also known as prosopography. Cooperson shows that pre-modern *akhbārīs* expressed a view of society com-

<sup>64</sup> Jonathan Berkey, *Popular Preaching and Religious Authority in the Medieval Islamic Near East* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), 49 n. 75. The name might also be rendered as Ḥurayfish.

<sup>65</sup> The characterization of the immense popularity of ḥadīth as the successful cultivation of valorized lineages of reported speech is argued in Recep Şentürk, *Narrative Social Structure: Anatomy of the Hadith Transmission Network, 610–1505* (Palo Alto, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005).

<sup>66</sup> Nabil Sa‘d al-Dīn al-Jarrār (ed.), *Majmū‘ fihi ‘Asharah Ajzā’ Ḥadīthiyah* (Amman: Dār al-Basḥā’ir al-Islāmiyah, 2001), 275, no. 255/17. For a comparatively full treatment of the textual reception of variants of this well-known ḥadīth, see Maghen, “Merry Men,” 286–287. To my knowledge, no one has yet discussed this example.

posed of autonomous, regularized groups (*ṭawāʾif*, sg. *ṭāʾifah*) which asserted (or had asserted on their behalf) many different claims to authority. The biographers of poets, musicians, and grammarians claimed them to be discrete, knowledge-based, and perhaps even professionalized *ṭāʾifahs*. Eventually the form of universal prosopographies, in which various *ṭāʾifahs* appear in the same work, took hold; Cooperson designates the first exponent of this tendency as *The History of Baghdad* (*Tārīkh Baghdād*) by al-Khaṭīb al-Baghdādī (he of the eggplant *sikbāj* predilection; d. Baghdad, 1071).<sup>67</sup> Several centuries later Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī (d. Aleppo, 1282) produced *The Encyclopedia of Littérateurs* (*Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ*), in which he recorded the activity of various *ṭāʾifahs* from Baghdad and beyond.<sup>68</sup> Cooperson describes Yāqūt's citational method in composing the book as follows: "He collected biographies of 'grammarians, lexicologists, genealogists, famous Qur'an readers, chroniclers, historians, well-known stationers and scribes, epistolographers, eponymous calligraphers,' and the like. All these he placed together in [*The Encyclopedia of Littérateurs*] in a super-*ṭāʾifa* called *al-udabaʾ*, 'people of culture.'"<sup>69</sup>

The drive to include as many different *ṭāʾifahs* as possible in a single work meant that divergent claims to authority within the super-*ṭāʾifa* of littérateurs had to be compared, assessed, and ultimately adjudicated. One of the littérateurs described by Yāqūt was the famed Aḥmad ibn al-Ḥusayn ibn Yaḥyā ibn Saʿīd al-Hamadhānī, better known as Badīʿ al-Zamān (literally, "The Wonder of the Age"; d. Herat [Afghanistan], 1008). Throughout his one-year stay in Nishapur (modern Iran) he was patronized by the Mikālīs, one of the most important political families in the city.<sup>70</sup> The Mikālīs supported al-Hamadhānī in the hopes that their own prestige would be enhanced on account of his literary and intellectual genius, talents which are dramatically evidenced in Yāqūt's entry on al-Hamadhānī in *The Encyclopedia of Littérateurs*.<sup>71</sup> In the most notorious segment of this entry, Yāqūt quotes a work entitled *The Bloody Sash* (*Kitāb al-Wishāḥ al-Dammīyah*) by Abū al-Ḥasan ʿAlī ibn Abī al-Qāsim al-Bayhaqī (d. Nishapur, 1169), in which were

67 Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 17.

68 Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ* (= *Irshād al-Arīb ilā Maʿrifat al-Adīb*), ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās, 7 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Gharb al-Islamī, 1414/1993), 1:239–255 no. 78.

69 Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 17.

70 For references to this connection see Everett K. Rowson, "Religion and Politics in the Career of Badīʿ al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 107.4 (1987), 653–673, here 665f. For the political importance of the Mikālī family generally, see: Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn Bayhaqī, *Tārīkh-i Masʿūdī*, ed. Said Naficy [Saʿīd Nafisi], 2 vols. (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Dānishgāh-i Tihārān, 1319–1332/1940–1953), 2:915–968.

71 Yāqūt, *Muʿjam al-Udabāʾ*, 1:236, 239–244.

brought together reports of a formal debate between al-Hamadhānī and his nemesis, Abū Bakr al-Khwārizmī (d. Nishapur, 993). The choice of opponent added an additional layer of intrigue surrounding the proceedings for the debate's observers, as al-Khwārizmī himself was a one-time protégé of the powerful local governor (*ra'īs*) of Nishapur, Aḥmad Mikālī. By the time of his battle with al-Hamadhānī, however, al-Khwārizmī had fallen out of favor with the family that now backed his rival.<sup>72</sup>

The details the debate suggest that one of the two *littérateurs* will prevail in his claim to literary precedence. The presiding party is the notable local religious figure Abū al-Ṭayyib Sahl al-Ṣu'lūkī (d. Nishapur, 1013–14)<sup>73</sup>, and the contest itself consists of an agreed upon set of tests of loquaciousness: extemporaneous poetic composition, demonstrations of philological prowess, and more than a few heated jibes at one another. Yāqūt avoids siding overtly with either al-Hamadhānī or al-Khwārizmī during his description of the debate, but the arc of the narrative eventually forces him into pronouncing a judgment. In the climax of the account, Yāqūt describes how al-Ṣu'lūkī called an end to the debate after the crowd had turned against al-Khwārizmī (*al-qawmu ankarū 'alā l-Khwārizmī*) for his inability to keep up with al-Hamadhānī's verbal pyrotechnics. Yāqūt describes the concluding scene: "Abū al-Ṭayyib [al-Su'lūkī] said, 'We have found out (*'alimnā*) which of these two men is superior and more poetic [viz. al-Hamadhānī].' Then [al-Hamadhānī] stood and grasped al-Khwārizmī's head and hand and said, 'Bear witness that the victory is his (*ishhadū anna l-ghalabata lahu*)!' He said that in a sarcastic manner (*'alā sabīli l-istihzā'*)."<sup>74</sup>

The bluntness with which Yāqūt informs the reader of al-Hamadhānī's sarcasm is arresting, but not ultimately surprising. Nishapur, though a large and wealthy city at the time, was still not big enough for two men to claim the crown of literary accomplishment. For Yāqūt, the evidence of both the audience and al-Ṣu'lūkī siding with al-Hamadhānī was decisive as to his victory, but al-Hamadhānī's own declaration that al-Khwārizmī had won presented an unacceptable narrative twist. The only way for Yāqūt to reconcile the competing verdicts was to reject one of them as sarcastic (*'alā sabīli l-istihzā'*), and to construe al-Hamadhānī's seeming deferral of his rightful victory as a patronizing and devastating parting shot to his already wounded adversary. Immediately afterward,

<sup>72</sup> Charles Pellat, s.v., "al-Khwārizmī," *EI2*.

<sup>73</sup> This appears to be a different person from the famous legal scholar and theologian of the same name, who died in the year 979–80, i.e., before this event took place: Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad al-Dhahabī, *Siyar A'lām al-Nubalā'*, ed. Shu'ayb al-Arna'ūt and Bashshār 'Awwād Ma'rūf, 24 vols. (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Risālah, 1422/2001), 16:235–239.

<sup>74</sup> Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, 1:243.

in Yāqūt's recounting, al-Khwārizmī returned to his house, "completely secluded himself" (*inkhazala inkhizālan shadīdan*), and promptly died – whether of humiliation or natural causes is not precisely known.<sup>75</sup>

### ***Invective Poetry (hijā')***

Arabic poetry (*shi'r*) provides a great many examples of the willingness to express a negative judgment of an individual, some of which are doubly interpretable. Despite employing an idiom best known for allusion (*majāz*), no small number of poets favored being quite direct in delivering their opinions and insults. A simple illustration of the merely critical can be found in the widely used trope of the *shāmit*—"one who delights in the misfortunes or downfall of another."<sup>76</sup> Similarly, Sinan Antoon has recently shown that the tendency toward overt satire was instrumental in both the spectacular success and eventual marginalization of the "outrageous" (*mujūn*) and "obscenity" (*sukhf*) poetic sub-gen-

75 Yāqūt, *Mu'jam al-Udabā'*, 1:244.

76 A non-exhaustive but temporally and geographically representative accounting of pre-modern poets who invoked the concept includes: 'Alqamah ibn Faḥl (d. 561?), *Wa-shāmitun biyya lā takhfā 'adāwatahu* [And a delighter in my misfortune, who hides not his enmity]: *Sharḥ Diwān 'Alqamah ibn 'Abdah al-Faḥl*, ed. Ḥannā Naṣr al-Ḥittī (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1414/1993), 78; Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm (d. 620), *Kam qā'imīn yuḥzinuhu maqtalī / wa-qā'idīn yarqubunī shāmitun* [How much did my death sadden upright men / and how much did (so-called) leaders keep watch over me, hoping for (my) downfall?]: *Diwān Qays ibn al-Khaṭīm*, ed. Nāṣir al-Dīn al-Asad (Beirut: Dār al-Šādir, 1962), 211; Abū Nuwās (d. Baghdad, 813), *Wa-innī bi-shahri l-šawmi idh bāna shāmitun / wa-innaka yā Shawwālū li la-šadīqu* [When the month of fasting (i.e., Ramaḍān) appears, how eagerly I await its downfall! / You, O Shawwāl (i.e., the month after Ramaḍān), are surely a close friend!]: Abū Nuwās, *Diwān Abī Nuwās* (Beirut: Dār al-Šādir, 1962), 441; Abū Tammām (d. Mosul, 845), (a) *Kānat shamātatu shāmitin 'āran fa-qad / šarat bihi tanḍu thiyā-bi l-'ari* [The malicious joy of the one who delighted in (my) misfortune is a disgrace, for / that feeling shall be diminished, like the clothes of the naked], al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrizī, *Sharḥ Diwān Abī Tammām*, ed. Rāji al-Asmar, 2 vols. (Beirut: Dār al-Kitāb al-'Arabī, 1414/1994), 1:339.32, and (b) *Mašārī'un lam tūriḥ shanāran wa-innahā / la-yarta'u fihā shāmitun 'inda jāhili* [Battlefields which passed down no disgrace / yet the delighter in misfortune revels there with the ignorant]: al-Khaṭīb al-Tabrizī, 2:231.16; Ibn Mu'tazz (d. Baghdad, 908), *Mā kuntu akhshā an tuhawwala nazrati / ilā shāmitin min ghābiẓin wa-ḥasūdi* [I never feared that my sight would be directed / to a delighter in (my) misfortune, acting in anger and envy]: Ibn Mu'tazz, *Diwān Ibn Mu'tazz*, ed. Karam al-Bustānī (Beirut: Dār al-Šādir, 1961), 187; Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb (d. Fes, 1374), *Aghrā biyya l-shāmitu l-ḥasūdu* [The envious one, delighting in my misfortune, goaded me]: *Diwān Lisān al-Dīn Ibn al-Khaṭīb al-Silmānī*, ed. Muḥammad Muftāḥ, 2 vols. (Casablanca: Dār al-Taḥāfah, 1989), 2:378 no. 278. Cf. the brief comment on the relationship of the *shāmit* to *sukh-rīyah* in al-Šulḥ, *al-Sukhrīyah fī al-Nathr al-'Arabī*, 3 n. 1.

res.<sup>77</sup> Most famously exemplified by Abū Nuwās (d. Baghdad, 813 or 815) and Ibn al-Ḥajjāj (d. Baghdad, 1001), *sukhf* dealt conceptually with the negative evaluation of someone's "shallow-wittedness."<sup>78</sup> For instance, in a few short lines Ibn al-Ḥajjāj takes direct aim at the intellects of two of the most celebrated representatives of the Arabic rhetorical tradition: the Umayyad era poet al-Farazdaq (d. Basra, 728) and the grammarian and Qur'anic exegete 'Alī ibn Ḥamzah al-Kisā'ī (d. Kufa, 805). With a salaciousness characteristic of *sukhf*, Ibn al-Ḥajjāj declared himself (Antoon's translation):

A youngster whose knowledge toys  
with the grand masters

[Who has] a thought that slaps al-Farazdaq in poetry  
and a grammar that fucks al-Kisā'ī's mother.<sup>79</sup>

If the *shāmit* and poet of *sukhf* couched their opinions in terms too direct for audiences to misconstrue, then the sub-genre of satiric invective (*hijā'*), in which one's enemies are lampooned, sometimes quite viciously, offers better grounds for identifying sarcasm.<sup>80</sup> *Hijā'* as a negatively charged speech act is attested from the sixth century CE and primarily refers to verbal contests of authority. We find that the Prophet Muḥammad declared that it was licit to inveigh against

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77 Antoon, *Poetics of the Obscene*, 45–63. James E. Montgomery disagrees with Antoon's designation of *sukhf* as a genre unto itself, and argues instead that poets subsumed all such works under the technical term *mujūn*: Montgomery, s.v., "Sukhf," *EI2*. See also Zoltán Szombathy, *Mujūn: Libertinism in Medieval Muslim Society and Literature* (London: E.J.W. Gibb Memorial Trust, 2013).

78 No less interested in *sukhf* than his contemporary Ibn al-Ḥajjāj, al-Hamadhānī described the phenomenon thus: "The *sakhif* or exponent of *sukhf* is defined [...] as 'the one who is heedless about the consequences to him of what he does, and the one whose crown of the head is unperturbed by a blow'." C.E. Bosworth, *The Medieval Islamic Underworld: The Banū Sāsān in Arabic Society and Literature*, 2 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1976), 1:64.

79 Antoon, *Poetics of the Obscene*, 47.

80 Examples of this sub-genre span the entirety of the written record of Arabic literature. Studies in Arabic covering the history of its development include: Muḥammad Maḥmūd Ḥusayn, *Al-Hijā' wa-l-Hajjā'ūn fī al-Jāhiliyyah* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Ādāb bi-l-Jamā'iz, 1947); Ḥusayn, *Al-Hijā' wa-l-Hajjā'ūn fī Šadr al-Islām* (Beirut: Dār al-Nahḍah al-'Arabiyyah, 1970); Aḥmad Shayyib, *Tārīkh al-Naqā'id fī al-Shi'r al-Arabī* (Cairo: Maktabat al-Nahḍah al-Miṣriyyah, 1966); Ilyās Salim Ḥawī, *Fann al-Hijā' wa-Taṭawwuruḥu 'inda al-'Arab* (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfah, 1970). Those unfamiliar with Arabic should especially consult: G.J.H. van Gelder, *The Bad and the Ugly: Attitudes Towards Invective Poetry (hijā') in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989). The authors of the *EI2* entry for *hijā'* note that the form requires satire, but do not admit the presence of any sarcastic element until late nineteenth-century Turkish novels: Fahir İz, s.v., "Hidjā': (iii) Turkish Literature," *EI2*.

anyone who inveighed against his holy person; concurrently, poets were said to “vie in inveighing” (*muhājāt*) to determine which of them was superior.<sup>81</sup> No few examples of this genre were directed at a patron or mighty ruler. Even the caliph ‘Umar ibn al-Khaṭṭāb (re. 634–644), widely regarded as one of the most fearsome and uncompromising members of the early Muslim community, dreaded the sharp tongue of the poet Jarwal ibn al-Ḥuṭay’ah (d. Medina, after 632).<sup>82</sup>

*Hijā’* also “punched down” at less lofty objects by parodically invoking other, more complimentary genres. An example of this “generic transformation”<sup>83</sup> can be seen in the works of the Iraqi poet al-Mutanabbī (killed al-Nu‘mānīyah [Iraq], 965), who was renowned for his panegyric (*madh*) in praise of various patrons, most famously Sayf al-Dawlah (d. Ḥamdān [Syria], 967).<sup>84</sup> His works exemplify the features of the *madh* genre, which guided the reader to the correct impression of their subject. One of these typical features was for the author to open the poem with mention of a beloved woman and an illustration of his abiding connection to her, as al-Mutanabbī does here:

‘Awādhilu dhāti l-khālī fiya ḥawāsīdu  
wa-inna ḍajī’a l-khūdi minnī la-mājidun  
Yaruddu yaddan ‘an thawbiḥā wa-huwa qādirun  
wa-ya’sī l-hawā fi ṭayfiḥā wa-huwa rāqīdun

<sup>81</sup> Ibn Manẓūr, s.v., “h-j-w,” *Lisān*, 4627.

<sup>82</sup> Ignaz Goldziher, “Der Dīwān des Ġarwal [sic] b. Aus al-Ḥuṭay’a,” *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 46 (1892), 1–54; 47 (1893), 43–85, *infra*. Another example of anti-government invective is posed in the works of Dī’bil ibn ‘Alī al-Khuzā’ī (d. Basra, 860), although the attribution is contentious: Leon Zolondek, *Di’bil b. ‘Alī: The Life and Writings of an Early ‘Abbāsīd Poet* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 1961); ‘Abd al-Karīm ‘Ashtar, *Di’bil ibn ‘Alī al-Khuzā’ī Shā’ir Āl al-Bayt: Ḥayātuhu wa-Shi’ruhu. Dirāsah Taḥlīliyah* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1964); for references to competing attributions, see Fuat Sezgin. *Geschichte des arabischen Schrifttums*, 10 vols. (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1966–1984), 2:532. In spite of this pall of suspicion, the *hijā’* attributed to Dī’bil (and others) has been studied as a speech act by Beatrice Gruendler, “‘Abbāsīd Praise Poetry in of Light of Speech Act Theory and Dramatic Discourse,” in *Understanding Near Eastern Literatures: A Spectrum of Interdisciplinary Approaches*, eds. Beatrice Gruendler and Verena Klemm (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2000), 157–169.

<sup>83</sup> The finest discussion of the issue of “the transformation of genres,” in pre-modern Arabic poetry remains Andras Hamori, *On the Art of Medieval Arabic Literature* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2015 [1974]), 3–78; cf. Antoon, *Poetics of the Obscene*, 18–24. The comic transformation from poetic “lament” (*marthiyah*) to *hijā’* has been discussed by Pieter Smoor, “Ibn al-Rūmi: His Elegies and Mock-Elegies for Friend and Foe,” *Qaderni di Studi Arabi* 15 (1997), 93–118.

<sup>84</sup> For details of this relationship, see Andras Hamori, *The Composition of Mutanabbī’s Panegyrics to Sayf al-Dawla* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1992).

[The moralists on dark stallion camels, envious of me!  
 Their fuss over my beloved is a laud indeed.  
 He, the continent, turns his hand from her clothes  
 And resists the urge to conjure her while he sleeps.]<sup>85</sup>

After opening with this obligatory praise for the beloved, exemplary *madḥ* also commented effusively on the (male) subject's praiseworthy qualities: bravery, magnanimity, and surpassing excellence when compared to one's peers. Al-Mutanabbī obeyed the conventions of *madḥ* in this regard, as well:

*‘Alā qadri ahli l-‘azmi ta’ti l-‘azā’imu*  
*wa-ta’ti ‘alā qadri l-kirāmi l-makārimu*  
*Wa-ta’zumu fī ‘ayni l-ṣaghīri ṣighāruhā*  
*wa-taṣghuru fī ‘ayni l-‘azīmi l-‘azā’imu*  
*Yukallifu Sayfu l-Dawlati l-jaysha hammahu*  
*wa-qad ‘ajazat ‘anhu l-juyūshu l-khaḍārimu*

[Signs of greatness proceed in accordance with the great  
 and acts of nobility proceed in accordance with the noble.  
 The puny acts of the insignificant in their own eyes appear grand  
 while in the eyes of the great, signs of their own greatness grow humble.  
 Sayf al-Dawlah tasks his army with his affair  
 but other venerable armies prove incapable.]<sup>86</sup>

One example from al-Mutanabbī's *madḥ œuvre*, however, gives the reader pause as a result of its failure to exhibit the aforementioned conventions convincingly. In this piece, al-Mutanabbī describes two house servants killing a trouble-making rat. The entirety of the poem, in van Gelder's translation, reads:

The rat that dared to raid has now become  
 Fate's prisoner, by perdition slain!  
 Kināna's man, and ‘Āmir's man hit it  
 they slew it, flat on its face, in Arab style.  
 The two men took upon themselves to kill  
 now which of you has taken the precious spoils?

<sup>85</sup> Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad al-Mutanabbī, *Diwān al-Mutanabbī* (Beirut: Dār Bayrūt, 1403/1983), 318. The exemplary components of the opening line of the *qaṣīdah*, known as the *nasīb*, are fully discussed in Renate Jacobi, *Studien zur Poetik der altarabischen Qaṣīde* (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1971), 13–49.

<sup>86</sup> Abū al-Ḥasan al-Wāḥidī, *Sharḥ Diwān al-Mutanabbī*, ed. Friedrich Dieterich (Berlin: Berolini, 1861), 247. By here disparaging the “venerable” (*makhāḍrim*), those poets who lived in both the pre-Islamic (*al-jāhiliyah*) and Islamic eras, al-Mutanabbī also indirectly praises himself; cf. van Gelder, “Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 1,” 92.



And which one stood behind the beast?  
(For certainly its bite is in its tail).<sup>87</sup>

A pre-modern reader might very well have puzzled over al-Mutanabbī's offering, and not known what to make of it. This is certainly some strange *madḥ*: absent are the deeds of a worthy hero, replaced by two men endeavoring to kill a lone rodent; no mention is made of standing at the head of armies but rather behind the beast, a potential act of cowardice<sup>88</sup>; most worryingly, the beloved girl whom we expect to head our poem has seemingly disappeared. All of these apparent conventional absences can be explained if the poem is read in a voice of sarcastic inversion. Both van Gelder and the Egyptian critic Taha Hussein (Ṭāhā Ḥusayn; d. Cairo, 1973) before him interpret the poem as a commentary on the two men's apparent impotence<sup>89</sup>; here, I wish to consider the possibility that the rat might serve as a stand-in for the female beloved.

Reading from this standpoint introduces a politically sexual dimension of interpretation, with clear implications for the poem as a whole. As argued by Beatrice Gruendler, this breaking of conventional ethical code seems to go hand in hand with the violation of generic expectations in many poems.<sup>90</sup> This reading transforms the poem under consideration into a rather graphic recounting of a rape, certainly not a topic off-limits to pre-modern audiences (cf. Ovid and

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<sup>87</sup> See van Gelder's comments on this episode: van Gelder, "Al-Mutanabbī's Encumbering Trifles," *Arabic & Middle Eastern Literature* 2.1 (2007), 5–19, here 8, n. 21.

<sup>88</sup> A similar instance of mock-heroism, exhibited by harming animals, is evinced in the work of al-Hamadhānī (or perhaps a pseudo al-Hamadhānī), and discussed in Monroe, *The Art of Badī' al-Zamān al-Hamadhānī*, 33. However, defenses of cruelty to animals were also made in the pre-modern era: Sara Tlili, "Animals Would Follow Shāfi'ism: Legitimate and Illegitimate Violence to Animals in Medieval Islamic Thought," in *Violence in Islamic Thought from the Qur'an to the Mongols*, eds. Robert Gleave and István Kristó-Nagy (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2015), 225–244.

<sup>89</sup> Van Gelder, "Encumbering trifles," loc. cit.; Ṭāhā Ḥusayn, *Ma'a al-Mutanabbī*, 12th ed. (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, N.D.), 40–41.

<sup>90</sup> The positive counter to this argument as it relates to *madḥ* poetry has also been expressed: "These poems are endowed [by the poet] with a material and ethical value that was matched with the counter-values of reward and protection [by the patron], outside the text." Beatrice Gruendler, *Medieval Arabic Praise Poetry: Ibn al-Rūmī and the Patron's Redemption* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 27. See also van Gelder, who contends that "the ancient forms of *hijā'* were often meant to insult and to humiliate, sometimes by mockery and not rarely by means of obscenity. Yet they were respectable verse, in which the ethical standards of bedouin society are observed and a lack of any of the cardinal virtues is denounced": van Gelder, "Against Women, and Other Pleasantries: The Last Chapter of Abū Tammām's *Ḥamāsa*," *Journal of Arabic Literature* 16 (1985), 61–72, here 64.



Livy's treatment of the rape of Lucretia).<sup>91</sup> As both Renate Jacobi and Abdelfattah Kilito have noted, pre-modern Arabic poetics reflected sexual ethics in the celebration of the standard of chastity, especially on the part of the female<sup>92</sup>; al-Mutanabbī evinces his own regard for the convention of continence in the second line of the first poem cited above. Thence, the “female” character described in the first line of this poem “dared to raid”, a clear violation of the prescription of the celibate ideal. This violation invites the collapse of the expected moral order, as al-Mutanabbī depicts this character in several compromising positions at the mercy of two men whose fearsomeness no longer seems in doubt. The concomitant violence of this reading gains further credence when compared to Ibn al-Ḥajjāj's apparent unconcern for the sanctity of “the precious spoils” of the leading lady in his poem, discussed above. Certainly, the interpretation of this poem as an instance of sarcastic “victim blaming” problematizes van Gelder's contention that, “it would have been easy for the victims [of this poem] to laugh it off as a joke, because it is a joke.”<sup>93</sup> Regardless of which way the reader chooses to receive the verses, she can only be satisfied with the poem by seeing it for what it is: a sterling example of sarcasm which inverts the genuine praise of *madḥ* into the belittlement and humiliation of *hijā'*.

## Conclusions

The preceding discussion does not constitute an exhaustive review. Nevertheless, the recognition of instances of sarcasm in pre-modern Arabic literature raises the question: Why was sarcasm not much discussed by lexicographers and literary theorists of the pre-modern period, despite being employed? Given the limited amount of reference made to sarcasm as *tahakkum* or one of its synonyms and the small sample of texts examined here, I am hesitant to advance a definitive theory as to why this was the case. Be that as it may, a final reference can be made to a debate over grammar (*naḥw*), a subject studied, at least cursorily, by every scholar who wrote in Arabic. Michael Carter has shown persuasively that the validity of “induction” (*istiqrā'*) as a means of drawing conclusions

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91 Van Gelder himself has recognized that some poetry treats exactly this theme in van Gelder, “Sexual Violence in Verse: The Case of Jī‘thin, al-Farazdaq's Sister,” *Violence in Islamic Thought*, 175–190.

92 Abdelfattah Kilito, “The Poetics of the Anecdote,” in *The Author & His Doubles*, ed. and trans. Michael Cooperson (Syracuse, NY: Syracuse University Press, 2001), 55–57. This chaste ideal is exemplified in poetry ascribed to the ‘Udhri tribe: Renate Jacobi, s.v., “‘Udhri,” *EL2*.

93 Van Gelder, “Encumbering Trifles,” 8.

about the systematic nature of grammatical theory (*uṣūl al-naḥw*) divided two schools in the neighboring Iraqi cities of Basra and Kufa.<sup>94</sup> Carter utilizes the arguments of two mid-tenth-century Basran grammarians, Ibn Wallād (d. Miṣr [Egypt], 933) and Abū al-Qāsim ‘Abd al-Raḥmān al-Zajjājī (d. Ṭibriyah [Tiberius, Lebanon], 951 or 954), which predate both the theories of *tahakkum* and the exegetical, biographical, and poetic works examined, above. Exponents of the Basran and Kufan schools each recognized that their respective grammatical tenets involved some amount of induction. The Basrans, whose views eventually won out, argued that inductive grammatical principles are valid only insofar as they describe speech acts within a strictly defined corpus comprising: (1) the Qur’an; and (2) the lexicon of Bedouin Arabs, whom the Basrans viewed as the “purest” earthly speakers of Arabic. The Kufans opposed this position and argued that induction should not be restricted to a given corpus, and were thus portrayed as deriving their conclusions from “anomalous” (*shādhdh*) phenomena of the Arabic language. The Basrans’ position triumphed, Carter maintains, because it was “anchored in the actuality of Islamic practice,” and “had real practical power,” as enacted in the interpretation of the Qur’an and the application of the law (*shari‘ah*).<sup>95</sup> The restricted use of induction in grammatical theory thus represents the Basrans’ “political” victory as much as the Kufans’ rhetorical defeat.

Carter’s conclusion recalls Pellat’s thesis that the demands of “serious” Islamic scholarship eventually and effectively restricted instances of “comedy” to a narrowly circumscribed and unimportant corner of literature. However, Pellat’s attribution of a ghettoized or “anomalous” status to comedy in pre-modern Islamicate literature misrepresents the rhetorical strategies, sarcasm included, that authors employed. To wit, Carter’s appraisal of the status of induction amongst grammarians offers another interpretation of the relationship between “serious” and “comic” literary affairs. Specifically, it illustrates how an instance of the comic lent rhetorical weight to a serious argument. The identification of *tahakkum* in the Qur’an directly supports Carter’s contention that the exegete

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94 Michael G. Carter, “The Struggle for Authority: A Re-examination of the Baṣran and Kūfan Debate,” in *Tradition and Innovation: Norm and Deviation in Arabic and Semitic Linguistics*, eds. Lutz Edzard and Mohammed Nekroumi (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1999), 55–70, here 57f. Carter is careful to differentiate between a pre-tenth century understanding of *uṣūl al-naḥw* as the “rational structure of natural language”, and the tenth century systematization of grammatical theory which went by the same name. Cf. the comments on “probabilistic reading” in Michael Cooperson, “Probability, Plausibility, and ‘Spiritual Communication’ in Classical Arabic Biography,” in *On Fiction and adab*, 69–84.

95 Carter, “Struggle for Authority,” 62f.

claimed the exclusive right to conduct inductive readings of the text so as to prevent his reader from adducing otherwise faulty conclusions. Moreover, it seems likely that a historical consciousness of the importance of induction, stemming from the need to transparently identify the shared standard between the author and reader, governed the reading of biography and even cases of satiric *hijā'*. The suspicion of induction is clear in Yāqūt's contribution to biography, a genre which rivaled in scope and production any Islamic science.<sup>96</sup> In *The Encyclopedia of Littérateurs* Yāqūt, precisely like an exegete, pointedly removes the potential for a wayward reading of al-Hamadhānī's admission of defeat. Instead he makes clear his own interpretation of al-Hamadhānī's sarcasm, thus closing any further inductive reading of the debate's outcome. In regards to al-Mutanabbī's *hijā'*, any non-inductive reading completely misses the point of the poem. If the verse were taken conventionally for *madh*, a critic would likely find it to be nothing less than an excruciating fiasco.<sup>97</sup> To prevent such a misreading al-Mutanabbī carefully reticulates broken conventions throughout this short piece, thus signaling to the assiduous reader that everything therein is not quite as it seems.

The identification of certain speech acts as sarcastic was necessary to the inductive logic of a given revelation, anecdote, or hemistich in relation to the work or corpus as a whole.<sup>98</sup> Therefore, Qur'anic exegetes, Yāqūt, and al-Mutanabbī implemented what they saw as appropriate measures to direct the process accordingly. In contrast, literary critics and lexicographers may have limited their discussion of sarcasm because the concept proved ultimately unhelpful in formulating rational categories of language. Indeed, neither of these latter groups betrays much interest in discussing inductive hypotheticals, or the way in which a given word's meaning might change if ironically juxtaposed to another.<sup>99</sup> Just as the Basran grammarians rejected as deviant any evidence not attest-

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<sup>96</sup> The production of prosopography in Arabic in the pre-modern period is unrivaled by any other literary tradition with the possible exception of Chinese: Paul Auchterlonie, *Arabic Biographical Dictionaries: A Summary Guide and Bibliography* (Durham, UK: Middle East Libraries Committee, 1987).

<sup>97</sup> Van Gelder quotes a judgment by the critic Abū al-Qāsim al-Āmidī (d. Basra, 981), perhaps responding to his contemporary al-Mutanabbī, that, "including silliness in a *madh* verse was 'extremely stupid': van Gelder, "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest, Part 1," 92 n. 44.

<sup>98</sup> See the forceful argument for the conceptual unity of poetry in Julie Scott Meisami, *Structure and Meaning in Medieval Arabic and Persian Poetry: Orient Pearls* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003, 1–15). Despite her useful corrective to van Gelder's atomistic readings, she overestimates the role of memorization and oral transmission of major literary works.

<sup>99</sup> One case of this is the use of expressions known as *gharīb*: "strange", or "uncommon." As S.A. Bonebakker argues, "Most classical scholars of literary theory [...] condemn the use of the

ed in the Qur'an or "pure" Bedouin speech acts, and similar to al-Jāḥiẓ's omission of ironic *sukhrīyah* from his theory of making oneself clear, other literary systematizers may have viewed instances of *tahakkum* or *istihza* as "anomalous" phenomena which proved unamenable to stable theories of poetics or language. Although it cannot be pursued further here, this hypothesis presents a promising avenue for further investigation.

To return to the subject of comedy with which this essay began, there can be no doubt that the selections discussed here were and continue to be read as comic interventions in otherwise "serious" texts or corpora. It is not difficult to imagine a pre-modern reader indulging in some self-satisfied *Schadenfreude* at the tribulations of the damned in the Qur'an, or cracking a smile (or perhaps laughing openly) at the scene of al-Hamadhānī lording his victory over al-Khwārizmī in *The Encyclopedia of Littérateurs*; we have already noted van Gelder's willingness to read a gentle humor in al-Mutanabbī's faux-*madh*. This double-interpretability, in which the reader moves from an earnest interpretation of the speech act to a jestful one, is described exactly in the expositions of *tahakkum* given by Ibn Abi Isba' and al-ʿAlawī.<sup>100</sup>

The obvious comedic dimension of these speech acts notwithstanding, the reader perceives, by considering their mood as sarcastic, an illocutionary inversion of meaning, one which upholds consequential moral, literary, and political standards. Exegetes first draw attention to God's apparent praise for the damned—calling them "full of honor" and offering them otherworldly desserts—only to interpret such overtures "correctly" as mocking those condemned to an eternity of punishment in the hell fire. The promise of this retribution serves as a sure and terrifying affirmation of the Almighty's omnipotence. Yāqūt likewise contrasts what first appears to be the sincere praise with which the victorious al-Hamadhānī showered al-Khwārizmī with his own interpretation that this behavior actually signals the latter's ignominious defeat. Such a characterization of al-Hamadhānī's sarcastic taunt underscores his total superiority all the more vivid-

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*gharīb* in prose and oratory": Bonebakker, s.v., "Gharīb," *EL2*. The rejection of certain strategies of "implication" (*taḍmīn*), especially in instances where the ambiguity in question was not the result of the use of an uncommon preposition, was especially prominent: Adrian Gully, "Taḍmīn, 'Implication of Meaning,' in Medieval Arabic," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 117.3 (1997), 466–480. See also Almog Kashner, "Iconicity in Arabic Grammatical Tradition: al-Suhaylī on the Correspondence between Form and Meaning," in *Romano Arabica XVI 2016: Modalities in Arabic*, ed. Ovidiu Peitřăreanu (Bucharest: University of Bucharest Center for Arab Studies, 2016), 201–224.

<sup>100</sup> This accords with Malti-Douglas's contention that, "the reader's psychological state has, of course, been influenced by the preceding parts of the text to which he had in turn brought earlier attitudes in a constant process of interaction" (Malti-Douglas, "Humor and Structure," 307).

ly when the reader recognizes that al-Khwārizmī's vanquishment confirms the influential Mikālī family's foresight in withholding their patronage for a more consummate pedant. Nowhere is the juxtaposition of praise and blame in the same speech act so clear as in the breaking of poetic convention which transforms laudatory *madh* into polemic *hijā'*. Through this sarcastic turn of genre al-Mutannabī achieves a remarkable degree of polarized translatability: depending on one's point of view, his faux-praise can be read either as the benign ribbing of bumbling male servants, *pace* Hussain and van Gelder, or may shift to the trivialization of the violence visited upon the female victim(s) of patriarchal sexual norms. It should be noted that the genres studied here by no means exhaust the possible venues for sarcasm in Arabic literature, and I think it likely that other genres, particularly *belles-lettres*, or *adab*, will prove a rich source for the phenomenon.<sup>101</sup>

This demonstration of the mechanics and purpose of sarcasm in pre-modern Arabic texts shows, *contra* Pellat, the weakness of a scheme of generic differentiation based on the perceived "humorous" character or content of a work; in the same vein, it casts doubt on Sadan's contention that the impetus for comic literature was a reactionary rejection of existing political or cultural norms and institutions. Quite to the contrary, the texts examined here show that pre-modern readers of Arabic recognized the intimate and oftentimes mutually reinforcing relationship between sarcasm, "serious" literature, and charged discourses of authority.

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**101** Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. Shiraz [Iran], 1023) has been identified as sarcastic in Alireza Z. Gharagozlou and Farzin Negahban, s.v., "Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī," *Encyclopedia Islamica*, eds. Wilferd Madelung and Farhad Daftary (Brill Online, 2008). The strength of this claim seems to rest on a passage that has been commented upon by Abdelfattah Kilito, in which al-Tawḥīdī criticizes the philosopher and translator Mattā ibn Yūnus (d. Baghdad, 939): "He used to dictate a page for a debased *dirhām* [lit. "*dirhām Muqtadir*"], referring to the worthless coinage minted during the economically depressed reign of the caliph al-Muqtadir bi-llāh; d. Baghdad, 932], all the while drunk, incoherent and derisive (*wa-yatahakkim*). To hear him tell it, he was a winner (*'indahu annahu fī ribḥin*); but in his enterprises he was the utmost sort of loser and in his social condition the lowest kind of nobody" (Kilito, *Lan Tatakallim Lughatī*, 110). Competing translations of this passage are offered in: Kilito, *Thou Shall Not Speak My Language*, 95; and Michael Cooperson, "To Translate or Not to Translate Arabic: Michael Cooperson and Wail Hassan on the Criticism of Abdelfattah Kilito," *Comparative Literature Studies* 48.4 (2011), 566–570, here 569.



Nicolino Applauso

# Sarcasm and its Consequences in Diplomacy and Politics in Medieval Italy

## Brunetto Latini's Letter to Pavia and Dante's *Monarchia*

The use of sarcasm played an important role in the culture and society of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy. Mostly in the self-governing system of the northern Italian commune, judges, lawyers, politicians, notaries, preachers, teachers, merchants, and entertainers employed sarcasm through invectives and disputations in a variety of settings both orally and in writing in their harangues, speeches, sermons, lessons, or songs, thus reaching a wide audience.<sup>1</sup> Two eloquent examples are a diplomatic letter written by Brunetto Latini and the political treatise *Monarchia*, written by Dante Alighieri, who both explicitly employed sarcasm and harsh criticism against their targets. In doing so, they both sought to achieve a political objective but caused fierce debates, including war and aggressive public demonstrations. In order to better understand all instances of the sardonic within these texts, a modern reader must frame them within their own original historical and political contexts and also examine the sarcasm used by their addressees. Indeed, both Brunetto's letter and Dante's treatise provoked furious responses that mimicked the same sarcasm contained in their sources. Historians have argued that Brunetto's sardonic letter fueled the momentous Battle of Montaperti.<sup>2</sup> Likewise, Dante's *Monarchia* caused strong reactions, such as its public burning in Bologna by the Cardinal Bertrand du Pouget and Guido Vernani's mocking essay-response *De reprobatione Monarchie composita a Dante*. Overall, both works show how sarcasm is vibrantly employed by

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1 Paul Oskar Kristeller, "Matteo de' Libri, Bolognese Notary of the Thirteenth Century, and his *Artes Dictamini*," *Miscellanea Giovanni Galbiati II. Fontes Ambrosiani* 26 (1951): 283–320; see also Ennio Rao, *Curmudgeons in High Dudgeon: 101 Years of Invectives (1352–1453)* (Messina: Edizioni Dr. Antonio Sfameni, 2007), 113.

2 The first to reach this conclusion was the fourteenth-century historian Giovanni Villani; see Julia Bolton Holloway, *Twice-Told Tales: Brunetto Latino and Dante Alighieri* (New York: Peter Lang, 1993), 37.

each author and their opponents as a tool to foment change and influence the public opinion in late medieval Italian society.

Following the public decapitation in Florence of the Abbot Tesaurus Beccaria of Vallombrosa, charged with treason in 1258, the Florentine Brunetto Latini, on behalf of his city, responded to the harsh letter sent from Tesaurus's hometown, Pavia, with a letter full of ironic wit and humorous puns. The irreverent letter, following the execution of such a prominent clergy member, soon caused great turmoil in Italy and prompted Pope Alexander IV to excommunicate the entire city of Florence. Surprisingly, only a few studies have been devoted to Brunetto's letter, despite the fact that as soon as it was written it enjoyed great popularity in Tuscany. This is evident if we consider that several copies of this letter are available in both the original Latin and expanded vernacular versions in numerous late thirteenth- and fourteenth-century collections of letters. These collections were called *Epistolaria* and were used as models for students involved in the discipline of the *ars dictandi*, the practice of writing epistles.<sup>3</sup> While examining this letter, we must keep in mind that according to medieval diplomacy each letter was supposed to follow specific rhetorical parameters framed within the medieval epistolary tradition. For example, letters often included a salutation, a narration, a petition, and a conclusion.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the presence of sarcasm, mordant wit, and hyperbolic language was not only very commonly employed in diplomatic letters, but also expected.<sup>5</sup> *Sarcasmos* [Sarcasm] in

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3 These epistolary collections comprise letters written by both established authors (such as Cicero, Cassiodorus and Pier della Vigna) and appointed teachers. They were mainly used for teaching and shared with students who copied and used them as examples for the creation of original compositions. Many of the letters were historical and once utilized for actual correspondence, but sometimes they were fictitious; see Paul Oskar Kristeller, *Renaissance Thought and its Sources*, ed. Michael Mooney (New York: Columbia University Press, 1979), 234. See also James J. Murphy, "Ars dictaminis: The Art of Letter-Writing," *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1974), 194–268. A detailed and meticulous inventory of manuals and treatises on letter-writing is provided by Emil J. Polak, *Medieval and Renaissance Letter Treatises and Form Letters: A Census of Manuscripts Found in Part of Western Europe, Japan, and the United States of America* (Leiden: Brill, 1994).

4 There was some disagreement over the specific number of parts to include in the letter, which were fixed at six by Cicero. The influential twelfth-century rhetorician Boncompagno da Signa often criticized Cicero and allowed only three parts, while Brunetto later fixed the canon in five parts; see Ronald G. Witt, *Italian Humanism and Medieval Rhetoric*, Variorum Collected Studies Series 737 (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001).

5 In thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Italy, students of rhetoric had to practice epideictic speech through the creation of speeches and writings that either blamed or praised a specific target. Their practice was modeled on Cicero's *De Oratore* and *Ad Herennium*, as well as Quintil-



particular was regarded as an important rhetorical figure with the specific function of ridiculing the enemy.<sup>6</sup> Finally, it is also important to focus on the Latin and vernacular versions of Brunetto's letter, because they likely played an important role in the episode, considering that in all the extant manuscripts they have been deliberately preserved side by side.

Before closely examining the letter, we should consider the main events leading to the creation of this document. The *casus belli* of the notorious execution of Abbot Tesauro unraveled quite abruptly and shortly after his arrival to Florence as legate of Pope Alexander IV. The purpose of his appointment was to bring peace in Florence, where great tensions existed between the two Guelph and Ghibelline factions, especially after 1250, when Frederick II died and the new system of government, the *primo popolo*, was created. The *primo popolo* was a republican government established after a popular revolution, which successfully redistributed the political power away from aristocratic elites. Even though this new regime was able to successfully transform Florence into a world economic power and was initially impartial between Guelphs and Ghibellines, it gradually started to favor Guelph rule.<sup>7</sup> These tensions reached their apex once numerous Ghibelline Florentine citizens were found guilty of conspiring against their own hometown with the neighboring Ghibelline city of Siena. Thus, in July 1258, they were banished from the city by the Florentine Guelphs.<sup>8</sup> Within a few months, on September 12<sup>th</sup>, the Abbot Tesauro was also accused by the Guelphs of treason for conspiring with the Ghibelline exiles against Florence, and, after being seized and brought in the public plaza of Saint Apollinaire, he confessed his treason in front of the angry crowd and then was finally decapitated. The episode is concisely recounted by fourteenth-century chronicler Giovanni Villani:

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ian's *Institutio Oratoria*. These manuals stress a solid connection between aggressive blame and mockery, thus confirming that sarcasm was one of the basic components of rhetoric. A lot has been written on this topic, but for a general overview of the use of rhetoric in a political and cultural context during thirteenth-century Europe, see Quentin Skinner, *The Foundation of Modern Political Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1978), 1: 27–41.

<sup>6</sup> See for example Julius Rufinianus's *De Figuris Sententiarum et Elocutionis* or Bede's *De Schematibus et tropis*, which all include "Sarcasmos" [Σαρκασμός] as an important rhetorical device; cited from Karl Halm, *Rhetores Latini Minores. Ex codicibus maximam partem primum adhibitis* (Leipzig: B. G. Teubner, 1863).

<sup>7</sup> John M. Najemy, *History of Florence: 1200–1575* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), 68–71.

<sup>8</sup> See Enrico Faini, "Passignano e i Fiorentini (1000–1266): indizi per una lettura politica," *Passignano in Val di Pesa. Un monastero e la sua storia, vol. I: Una signoria sulle anime, sugli uomini e sulle comunità (dalle origini al sec. XIV)*, ed. Paolo Pirillo (Florence: Leo S. Olschki Editore, 2009), 129–31.

Poi nel mese di settembre del detto anno (1258) il popolo di Firenze fece pigliare l' Abate di Valembrorsa, il quale era gentile uomo de' Signori di Beccheria di Pavia in Lombardia, essendoli apposto che a petizione de' Ghibellini usciti di Firenze trattava tradimento, e quello per martiro gli fece confessare, e scelleratamente nella Piazza di Santo Appolinare gli feciono a grido di Popolo tagliare il capo, non guardando a sua dignità, né a ordine sacro. Per la qual cosa il Comune di Firenze e' Fiorentini dal Papa furono scomunicati; e dal Comune di Pavia, ond' era il detto abate, e da' suoi parenti i Fiorentini che passavano per Lombardia ricevevano molto danno e molestia. E di vero si disse che 'l religioso uomo nulla colpa avea, con tutto che di suo legnaggio fosse grande Ghibellino.<sup>9</sup>

[Then in the month of September of the said year (1258), the people of Florence decided to take hold of the Abbot of Vallombrosa, who was a nobleman of the Lords of Beccheria from Pavia in Lombardy, because they were suspecting that he was plotting treason by aiding the Ghibelline exiles from Florence. Those made him confess through suffering, and heinously in the Plaza of Saint Apollinaire, by popular acclaim, cut his head off without regard to either his dignity or his religious order. For this incident, the Commune of Florence and the Florentines were excommunicated by the Pope, and all the Florentines who crossed the Lombardy region received much harm and obstruction from the Commune of Pavia, where the said Abbot was from, and his relatives. And in truth it was said that the aforesaid religious man had no fault, despite that for his lineage he was a prominent Ghibelline.]

As Villani notes, his execution brought great controversy, especially because the Abbot Tesauo was an important clergy member and his family belonged to a noble and prominent family that ruled Pavia and other northern Italian cities.<sup>10</sup> Additionally, he was the leader of the Vallumbrosan order in Tuscany, which at the time exercised important political and religious influence throughout Italy.<sup>11</sup> Lastly, Villani also notes that, despite his public confession, many believed that he was not guilty, even if affiliated with the important Ghibelline family of the Beccaria. By reading Villani's account, one can sense how much the issue divided people at the time, especially pertaining to the alleged innocence of the Abbot, as evidenced by the chronicler himself, who interjects the expression "si è detto" [it was said] and ventures to include the political epithet "Ghibelli-

<sup>9</sup> G. Villani, *Nuova Cronica*, ed. G. Porta, 3 vols. (Parma: Guanda, 1990–91); vol. I: 360. For clarity, I added the date. Unless otherwise attributed, all English translations are mine.

<sup>10</sup> Robolini mentions that the Beccaria family exerted key political influence in the Lombardy and Piedmont regions; Rogerio Beccaria was console of Pavia in 1257, while his grandnephew, Giovanni Beccaria, chief magistrate of Alessandria, was eventually exiled in 1258 by the Guelf family Dal Pozzo; see Giuseppe Robolini, *Notizie appartenenti alla storia della sua patria* (Pavia: Fusi, 1832), vol. IV.II: 193.

<sup>11</sup> Francesco Salvestrini, *Disciplina caritatis: Il monachesimo vallombrosano tra medioevo e prima età moderna* (Rome: Viella, 2008), 12–13.

no,” as the final word to describe the Abbot, thus casting some serious doubts that he was an innocent man.<sup>12</sup>

After the execution, the leaders of Pavia immediately wrote to the chief magistrate, the council and leadership of Florence a harsh letter to denounce the violent act and disclose their serious threats. The tone of their letters is strikingly heated, solemn and indignantly aggressive, thus very close to a war declaration:

Potestati, consilio et communi Florencie et capit.: Civitatis eiusdem potestas consilium et comune Pavie. Inviti loquimur, sed tacere nequimus. Audiat sane et intellegat orbis terre, quod provocati trahimur ab irrogatis nobis injuriis maximis et offensis, que non solum nostra exteriora turbantes, immo etiam usque animum intraverunt. Non solum ad nos usque pervenit sed iam est per Italie singulos terminos divulgata obstinata illa et inaudita temeritas et prorsus ab omni humanitate seposita, quam de Persona reverendi et clariissimi patris nostri Thesauri totius Valembrasane congregacionis abbatis viri sciencia, religione, et honestate spectabilis, facere hiis temporibus attemptastis et crudeliter adimplere, in quem, citra omnem justiciam inrationabiliter et indebite, legem de voluntate pessima facientes, manus Sacrilegas extentendo, premissis in eius corpus perenni pudicitia venerandum, tanquam in latronem, cruciatibus et tormentis, morte illum turpissima condemnantes, fecistis in vestra publica concione, pro dolor, Sacratissima capite multari, ex quo flagicio non immerito nomen vestrum et posteritatis vestre perpetua infamia polluistis....<sup>13</sup>

[To the Chief Magistrate, the Council, the Commune of Florence and authorities: the city and its Chief Magistrate, Council and Commune of Pavia. We speak not by invitation, nevertheless we cannot be silent. Let the Earth hear healthily and wisely that we were induced to respond for the grave affront and great offenses against us, which not only have unsettled our outward appearance, but have entered the very depth of our inner soul. That drastic and inconceivable recklessness, utterly alien to all humankind, not only has reached all the way to us but has spread now all over the lands of Italy. During these times you schemed to do and cruelly to perpetrate this recklessness against the person of the reverend and most dear Father of ours: Tesauero, Abbot of the entire Vallumbrosian Order, respected man of knowledge, religion, and honesty without regard to all justice unreasonably and illegitimately, making your own law through your awful will, extending sacrilegious hands, abandoning the chastity and reverence of his body, which deserved perennial veneration, just like a bandit, through sufferings and torments condemned him to a horrible death

<sup>12</sup> Robolini suggests that, unlike other historians, Villani shows some skepticism about the belief that the Abbot was a martyr; see Robolini, *Notizie*, 194.

<sup>13</sup> This transcription is taken from George Christian Gebauer, *Leben und denkwürdige Thaten Herrn Richards, Erwählten Römischen Kaisers* (Leipzig: Fritsch, 1744), 570–71. I modified the spelling and the punctuation of the original transcription. Gebauer’s transcription contains errors, and it is only limited to one manuscript; for more information on Gebauer’s transcription see Roberta Cella, “L’epistola sulla morte di Tesauero Beccaria attribuita a Brunetto Latini e il suo volgarizzamento,” *A scuola con Ser Brunetto: indagini sulla ricezione di Brunetto Latini dal Medioevo al Rinascimento. Atti del convegno internazionale di Studi Università di Basilea, 8–10 giugno 2006*, ed. Irene Maffia Scariati (Florence: Edizioni Del Galluzzo, 2008), 188–190.

by having decapitated his most holy head in your public assembly, deplorably. May his most holy head be avenged, for by this disgraceful action, not undeservedly, you have polluted with eternal infamy your name and your posterity....]

The opening of this “war letter” sets a harsh and Biblical tone by evoking both Deuteronomy 4:26 and Jeremiah 6:19, where in both examples the Earth is called as witness against the wrongdoing of Israel and the people are urged to obey God’s law. In a similar way, the authorities of Pavia assert that silence is not an option and that the entire Earth is called to witness the atrocities perpetrated by the Florentines against the Abbot.

With this and the following statement, the Pavesans extend their grievance beyond their hometown by underlining that the murder has larger implications all throughout Italy. Finally, the letter concludes by declaring that all Florentines are thus “*capitales et perpetuos inimicos*” [deadly and everlasting enemies] (571) and that no Florentine merchants or citizens are allowed to ever enter Pavia without serious and fatal consequences. This conclusive threat is explicitly reinforced with the unyielding words: “*per Dei gratiam possumus amicis magnifice obsequi et servire, et inimicos offendere hostiliter et potenter*” [Through God’s grace we are able to obey and serve our friends and damage more bitterly and powerfully our enemies] (571). By implying that any Florentine citizen who enters Pavia was no longer welcome and protected, the letter also seeks to make all economic and political ties between the two cities officially and irreversibly eradicated.

The letter written in reply by Florence to Pavia is traditionally ascribed to Brunetto Latini, the established notary, rhetorician, diplomat, and more often remembered for being Dante’s teacher.<sup>14</sup> The tone of the letter greatly differs from Pavia’s in its largely sardonic tone. As noted by Julia Holloway, “it is a scathingly sarcastic letter” (35). The sarcasm explicitly emerges from the very beginning in both the Latin and vernacular versions:

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<sup>14</sup> Even though the majority of manuscripts avoid mentioning who wrote this letter, the manuscript Vatican Chigiano L VII 267 explicitly mentions that Brunetto Latini is the author of the letter. The late manuscript Riccardiana 1592 erroneously attributes the letter to the Florentine Humanist Coluccio Salutati, who lived in the fourteenth century. To my knowledge, no scholars have contested Brunetto’s authorship, though some have expressed minor reservations; See Francesco Maggini, *La Rettorica italiana di Brunetto Latini*, (Florence: Reale Istituto degli Studi Superiori di Firenze, 1912); and Cella, “L’epistola sulla morte di Tesoro,” 198–99. The original letter with the signature and notarial seal would confirm Latini’s authorship, but unfortunately no scholars have been able to find it in any Lombard archives.

Magne prudentie viris, Potestati, Consilio, et Communi Papie; Potestas Capitaneus, Anciani et Comuni Florentie, quam non misere, Salutem. Si transmissa nobis Epistola, forsitan iracundie semine gravidata, concepit dolorem et peperit iniquitatem, prout illius series continebat, non ideo nostram responsionem a furore vel fletibus exordiri nec vobis consimili vicissitudine respondere, set mente pacatissima et quieta, non inherendo superbie, que radix est omnium vitiorum, litteratorie verbotenus volumus conferre vobiscum si nos aut vos fallit statera iustitie, vel pro qua parte ratio valeat, et cui similiter faverit equitas, et in libra ponderosa consentit....<sup>15</sup>

[To the great and prudent men, the Podestà, the Council and the Comune of Pavia. The Podestà, the Captain, the Anziani, and the Comune of Florence, which is not to be pitied, salute you. If the letter sent to us contained what is perhaps pregnant with the seeds of anger, conceived in grief and weighted in injustice, according to what had been sown, it should not therefore be fitting that our response should be out of anger or spoken swiftly nor that you similarly respond in turn, but from a most tranquil and calm mind, not clinging to pride, which is the worst of all vices, conferring upon you volumes of verbose writings, so that we or you tip the balance of justice, but rather what accords with the part of reason, and what similarly favors justice, and weight the scales....]

The very opening of the letter sets a subtly sarcastic tone evident in the salutation “Great and prudent men,” which initially may appear as a simple introductory formula for letter writing. But upon reading the letter sent by Pavia authorities, one should note that it did not express any particular form of prudence. On the contrary, the Pavesans explicitly declare that they cannot be silent any longer and must passionately denounce their Florentine foes. Brunetto’s ironic undertone of the term “prudencia” is evident especially in light of the next passage, where he describes the letter sent from Pavia as “pregnant with the seeds of anger.”

The contrast between prudence and anger emerges again a few years later when Brunetto writes his famous encyclopedia *Li Livres dou Tresor* [*The Book of Treasure*], which was written while he was in exile from Florence, an exile that was caused primarily by this incident: “Prudence is the middle ground between two extremes; it counterbalances and directs your thoughts and tempers works and measures words.... Take care to use your good sense calmly, without anger and without disturbance in your heart; otherwise you must be silent.”<sup>16</sup> Even though *The Book of Treasure* does not explicitly mention this incident, with its reference “to be silent,” this passage seems to reprimand the Lombard and Florentine Ghibellines as it strongly evokes the letter sent from the Pavia

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<sup>15</sup> The Latin letter of Brunetto Latini and its English translation are both taken from Holloway’s *Twice-Told Tales*, 36–37.

<sup>16</sup> Paul Barrette and Spurgeon Baldwin, trans., *The Book of Treasure of Brunetto Latini* (New York: Garland, 1993), 203.

citizens, and thus could cheekily imply that they indeed should have kept quiet. Furthermore, in his explicit reference to prudence and anger, Brunetto, for a second time, evokes his derisive reply.

The sarcastic tone at the opening of his letter is also evident in the vernacular version of the letter, which contains a significant variation to the term “prudent” with the following: “Alli huomini di grande savere” [To the men of great knowledge].<sup>17</sup> This greeting, as well as the subsequent epithet that depicts Pavia as “fontana di savere” [fount of knowledge] (209), could very well be read ironically, especially because the vernacular version of the letter emphasizes that the Pavesans are not knowledgeable of the true facts leading to the Abbot’s guilty sentence and subsequent execution.

Having introduced the imagery of the “libra” or scales, which figuratively evokes the weighing methods to measure goods by traders or to weigh justice by God, Brunetto presents a descriptive portion pertaining to the Abbot with the colorful expression: “Ecce Thesaurum vestrum” [Behold your Treasure! or Here is your Treasure!]. The term “treasure” could refer to both a large quantity of precious metal and to the Abbot himself (considering his proper name Tesauro, which means “treasure”); thus, the expression almost recalls an economic human transaction. Brunetto cleverly brings readers into a pseudo-market where they can see through his scales the true moral weight of the Abbot himself. Among the target readers of the letter there were surely merchants who were very familiar with this trading practice and the importance of using the scales to corroborate the validity of goods and finally avoid the well-spread practice of counterfeiting coins; in a moral sense this imagery also refers to the medieval belief of God’s scales that weighed men’s souls during the Last Judgment:<sup>18</sup>

...Ecce Thesaurum vestrum, qui sibi non thesaurificabat in celis, Valumbrose congregationis abbatem, de honestate, religione ac sanctitate maxima commendastis: ad quod potest verius respondere quod erat impudicus, nequam pessimus, nephandus, et omni crimine infamatus.

[Here is your Treasure—which is not treasured up in heaven—the Abbot of the Monastery of Vallombrosa, whom you remember as being of the greatest honor, religion, and sanctity; to which it could more truly be replied that he was shameless, even worse, unspeakable and infamous in all criminality.] (Holloway, *Twice-Told* 37)

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17 The vernacular version of Brunetto’s letter is taken from Cella, “L’epistola sulla morte di Tesauro,” 206–211. I used the second version supplied by Cella, which unlike other versions is preserved in its entirety in the Vatican Chigiano L VII 267. The English translation is mine.

18 See Diana Wood, *Medieval Economic Thought* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 89–109 and also William Bowsky, *The Finance of the Commune of Siena: 1287–1355* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970), 70–71.

Even though the letter gradually becomes more outspoken about the Abbot, the author still manages to balance the aggressive polemical language with mordant wit. This is particularly evident in the wordplay with “treasure” that could be perceived as both common and proper nouns. Through this irreverent joke, the Florentine notary declares that the Abbot is not the treasure that could be found in heaven, an idea derived from the Sermon on the Mountain in Matthew 6:19–21. Using the identical idea from the Gospel, he warns them that “they should not be concerned about laying up their treasure on earth, but should, rather, lay up treasure in heaven” (Holloway 203). By implication, he hyperbolically reverses the angry plea for justice expressed in the letter from the citizens of Pavia by subtly implying that the supposed “saintly” Abbot needs his compatriots’ assistance with prayers, since he is now in purgatory or worse, in hell. Moreover, the text includes an explicit sarcastic reference to the physical presence of the Abbot (“*Ecce Thesaurum vestrum*”). This opens up the possibility that his decapitated head accompanied the letter. It becomes even more probable if one juxtaposes the expression used by the Florentine writer with “*Ecce homo*” [behold the man] uttered by Pontius Pilate in John 19:15 when the physically afflicted Jesus is presented to the hostile Jerusalem crowd. Considering its sarcastic value, the phrase could also have implied that the hostile Pavia crowd could have been called to witness something more than a letter. All these additional nuances only reinforce the strong sarcastic valence of this snarky missive, which also emerges in the vernacular version.

In the second part of the letter, Brunetto curbs the sarcasm by including more explicit explanations about the motivation of the execution. In the expanded Tuscan vernacular version, he describes Tesauro more in detail as “*luxurioso, malvagio et infamato d’ogni crudele peccato*” [lustful, evil and inflamed by every cruel sin] (207) and concludes that he had been justly condemned for plotting against Florence because Florentine clerics, women, and even children witnessed his lust and thus resented him. Here again one can find another biblical reference to Luke 19:40, where Jesus declares that truth cannot be concealed even by the stones:

il chericato di Firenze grida contra lui, li uomini laici dicono quello medesimo, ancora le femmine e’piccioli fanciulli non se possono riposare. Anch’è più maravigliosa cosa, che pare che lle pietre ne rendano testimonianza et ridicano le sue disperate e verghogniose opere...secondo ch’egli manifestò anzi la sua morte cholla sua propia lingua dinanzi a’frati minori e predicatori et a molti altri religiosi.... Perché dunque giudicate disavedutamente, non richiesti noi né veduta la verità del facto? Perché siete commossi ad ira disordinata, e lli nostri senza cagione o ragione avete condannati? Or come difendete voi quello malvagio huomo, il quale se mille volte fosse sucitato mille dovea morire di crudele morte? (Cella, “L’epistola sulla morte di Tesauro,” 207–09)

[The clerics of Florence cry out against him, as do the laymen, as well as the women, and small children who find no peace. What is most remarkable is that even the stones bear witness and restate his disturbing and shameful deeds...giving that he revealed them before his death with his own tongue in front of the Friars Minor (the Franciscans), preachers, and many other clergy members.... Why then are you unwarily judging, without either requesting from us or having seen the truth of the matter? Why are you moved to unruly anger and have condemned our citizens without cause or reason? Why are you defending that wicked man who, even if he were to be resurrected a thousand times, would still have to die a cruel death a thousand times?]

Through this firm denunciation, Florentine authorities gravely state that the Abbot publicly confessed that he engaged in unwanted sexual activities and also conspired with outlaw Ghibelline exiles such as Farinata degli Uberti and Guido Novello. After presenting these allegations, Brunetto finally provides one last piece of evidence: “già in parte avea menato e menare volea a ccompiamento, et colle sue mani spendendo moneta, chome Firenze si partisse da Lucca, e cche nell’una et nell’altra fossero terribili battaglie de’seguaci de’decti traditori” (209–11) [already in part he sought to accomplish and was seeking to accomplish, and with his own hand he was spending money, his plan to split Florence from Lucca, waging in both cities dreadful wars through the followers of the said traitors]. This charge explicitly avers that the executed man was spending his own money to subsidize a revolt led by prominent Ghibellines against Florentine Guelfs. This accusation may refer to specific notarial documents, which could have been used as evidence for his trial. As the historian Cesare Paoli unearthed, one can find at the Siena archive written chapters from secret council meetings that were held there before 1258 and involved Ghibelline dissidents from Florence.<sup>19</sup> Even though these chapter meetings were recorded in Ghibelline Siena and concealed from Florentine Guelfs, clandestine information circulated in writing via sealed letters to all Ghibelline League members in other Tuscan cities. These documents could very well have been intercepted by Guelf spies, considering that during these times, both political factions were actively involved in espionage.<sup>20</sup> Upon consulting these Siennese secret documents, one can find numerous times the name of Farinata degli Uberti, who conspired with other Florentine Ghibellines acting as emissaries to foment a revolt against

<sup>19</sup> Cesare Paoli, “La battaglia di Montaperti: memoria storica,” *Bullettino della società senese di storia patria municipale* II (1869): 8.

<sup>20</sup> See Aude Cirier, “Diplomazia e retorica comunale: la comunicazione attraverso lo spionaggio politico nell’Italia medievale (secc. XII–XIII),” *Comunicazione e propaganda nei secoli XII e XIII. Atti del convegno internazionale (Messina, 24–26 maggio 2007)*, ed. Rossana Castano et al., (Rome: Viella, 2007), 199–215.



their hometown with the financial help of the cities of Siena, Lucca, and Pisa.<sup>21</sup> The involvement of citizens from Lucca in the Ghibelline League is indeed surprising, considering that in 1257 Florence and Lucca formed an alliance against all Tuscan Ghibellines.<sup>22</sup> Within this context, it is clear why Brunetto places specific emphasis on the city of Lucca in the letter. The possibility of losing this important ally could have indeed constituted a defeat of devastating proportions for Florence. Lastly, to my knowledge, no scholars have undertaken research on the aforementioned chapter councils in the Archivio di Stato in Siena to confirm that Brunetto's accusations were indeed well founded, and thus that the name of the Abbot appears recorded in some economic transactions with Siena or Lucca. One also may wonder why Tesauero, a native of Pavia, which like Siena was an eminent Ghibelline stronghold, was chosen for the delicate task of papal legate in a Guelf city.

Florentine citizens were very well aware that Pavia was inclined toward the Ghibellines, especially considering that in 1258 many of the Abbot's relatives were prominent Ghibelline rulers. Hence, besides the historical references highlighted thus far, Brunetto's sarcasm functioned as a tool to denounce the ongoing Ghibelline conspiracy in Tuscany, which also involved prominent clergy members such as the Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldino, who, together with Florentine Ghibellines and King Manfred, the son of Frederick II, was behind the conspiracy—unveiled in July 1258—to overthrow the Guelf government in Florence. With two previous letters likely written by Brunetto Latini in July 1258, the Florentine government notified Pope Alexander IV of the involvement of the Cardinal Ottaviano, urging him to take action.<sup>23</sup>

Thus, Brunetto's letter sent to Pavia should also be approached with this political context in mind. It comes as no surprise that Brunetto's sophisticated rhetorical structure is itself derisive as it mimics the style of Pier della Vigna, the notary of Emperor Frederick II and the most popular authority for letter writing in medieval times. Pier della Vigna's letters were considered not only the trademark

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21 The minutes and the notes of payments that document these secret meetings and espionage are available in the Archivio di Stato in Siena in the *Caleffo Vecchio*. See also Holloway, *Twice-Told Tales*, 29; and Giovanni Cecchini and Paolo Cammarosano, *il Caleffo Vecchio del comune di Siena*, 3 vols. (Siena: Lazzeri, 1931–1988).

22 In June 1257, Florence formed an alliance with Lucca against Pisa; see Holloway, *Twice-Told Tales*, 35.

23 Both letters were likely written by Brunetto on behalf of the Chief magistrate Iacobinus Rubens and Captain Guidescus De Ponte to the Pope after the Ghibelline conspiracy between July and August 1258, and thus a few months before Tesauero's execution. See G. Levi, "Il Cardinale Ottaviano degli Ubaldini secondo il suo carteggio e altri documenti," *Archivio della Società Romana di Storia Patria* 14 (1891): 231–303.

of Ghibellinism, but also of the *ars dictandi* itself. Every medieval Epistolarium always included his important letters. In his vernacular translation of Cicero entitled *La retorica*, Brunetto states that Pier was the master orator and took special care in organizing his letters in Florentine epistolaria.<sup>24</sup> Holloway notes that Brunetto Latini evokes Pier della Vigna's chancery style—and particularly his intricate and “blasphemous biblical punning”—to mock “the Ghibellines by mirroring back to them the imperial Ghibelline style” (*Twice-Told* 35). Overall, Brunetto's bitter letter confirms the hostility of Florence toward the Abbot but constitutes a political statement against the Ghibellines, as well. By directly accusing the Abbot on a personal level, he cleverly and tactfully avoids directly attacking the city of Pavia and the Papacy, which were Tesauro's civic and religious sponsors respectively.

Although Brunetto's letter may have achieved its purpose of diplomatically forestalling any further aggressive acts from Pavia, it nevertheless prompted Pope Alexander IV to respond with another letter that resolved the standoff in Pavia's favor, since it included an official interdict against the city of Florence. This official papal letter, probably written by the papal notary Giordano of Terracina, displays a good dose of sarcasm and even includes a word play on Florence, showing that even the Roman Curia did not refrain from employing Pier della Vigna's irreverent style.<sup>25</sup> The Pope was certainly made aware of Florence's sarcastic reply and sought to pay back Brunetto in the same coin:

Alexander, episcopus, servus servorum Dei etc. Rumor horribilis de abhominabili scelere, a Florentinis patrato civibus, nostris nuper insonuit auribus, vehementem nobis turbationem inferens, et dolorem. Pervenit ad nos fama, immo gravis infamia, de nova et enormi presumptione in civitate Florentina commissa. Ascendit, inquam, de civitate ipsa summus immanis flagitii, qui, per circuitum iam diffusus, conturbat putrore horrido alias regiones. Ecce! Siquidem clamat ad nos de Tuscia vox sanguinis viri religiosi, abbatis videlicet monasterii Valisumbrose.... Hec sunt devota et inclita opera, que de illis catholicis et magnificis civibus referuntur? Ista sunt bonitatis exempla, que de piis eius gestis ad terras alias civitas illa inhumana transmittit? Hec sunt clara preconia, quibus populus ille scelestus refertur? Hii sunt tituli probitatis, quibus illud facinorosum commune refulget? Ha! quam deformis res, generaliter quidem a christicolis detestanda.... Notata est propterea civitas illa Floren-

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**24** Fulvio Delle Donne, “Le parole del potere: L’epistolario di Pier della Vigna,” in *Pier delle Vigne in catene: da Borgo San Donnino alla Lunigiana medievale. Atti del Convegno Itinerante 28 maggio 2005–13 maggio 2006*, ed. Graziano Tonelli (Sarzana: Grafiche Lunensi, 2006), 112.

**25** During these years, the Cardinal Giordano of Terracina was the vice-chancellor of the Roman Curia, and he is accredited for organizing and recording of all Pier della Vigna's epistles in the Vatican manuscripts; see Delle Donne, “Le parole del potere,” 113–114; and Paolo Sambin, *Un certame dettatorio tra due notai pontifici (1260) Lettere inedite di Giordano da Terracina e di Giovanni da Capua* (Rome: Storia e letteratura, 1955).

cia labe turpissima, que vix unquam de ipsius facie poterit aboleri, et iam a florere vel a flore non est digna sortiri vocabulum, sed a flere pocius et a fletu. Que tanto certe facinore maculata merito tanquam horrida et non florida fieri debet. Cum et juste vereri possit, quod pro huiusmodi flagitio non solum eius actores sed eorum posterit pena forent....

[Alexander, Bishop, servant of the servants of God, etc. Horrible news of an abominable crime, from the chief of the Florentine citizens, has lately resounded in our ears, inflicting vehement upheaval upon us, and suffering. A rumor has reached us, nay grave infamy, of a new and great arrogance committed in the Florentine city. Come up, I say, out of the same city summit of enormous shame, he who, already scattered all around, disturbs other regions with horrid decay. Behold! From Tuscany indeed cries out to us the voice of the blood of the religious man, namely of the Abbot of the Vallombrosa Monastery.... Are these the devout and glorious works, which are recounted by those Catholic and wonderful citizens? Are these the examples of goodness, which with its pious deeds this inhumane city transmits to other lands? Are these the bright announcements, which are reported by that evil people? Are these the titles of honesty, with which this criminal commune shines? Ah! What an ugly thing, indeed generally cursed by Christ worshippers.... It is thus noted that city of Florence with the ugliest disgrace, which hardly ever can be regarded with its own appearance, and it is not worthy anymore to bear the designation of “flourishing” or “flowering,” but rather of “crying” and “grief.” Which certainly with such a dishonorable evil deed it should justly be made horrid and not florid. How can justice be respected, if for such disgraceful action not only the perpetrators but their posterity are not punished?]<sup>26</sup>

From the very start, the papal notary explicitly follows Brunetto’s reply by referring to his sarcastic call to the Abbot “Ecce Thesaurum vestrum” with the retort “Ecce!” which introduces a more positive description of the Abbot reminiscent of the letter written by the Pavesans. He then introduces a series of rhetorical questions which bite back at Florence with irreverent sarcasm. Starting from openly sarcastic remarks such as “Hec sunt devota et inclita opera, que de illis catholicis et magnificis civibus referuntur?” [Are these the devout and glorious works, which are recounted by those Catholic and wonderful citizens?], the papal diplomat introduces more aggressive questions that include negative epithets such as “civitas inhumana” [inhumane city] or “populus scelestus” [evil people] or “facinosum commune” [criminal commune]. Some of these disparaging terms could be linked to the previous correspondence that the Pope has had with the Florentines around July–August 1258. On that occasion, Pope Alexander IV was made aware of the Cardinal Ottaviano’s scheme of a Ghibelline coup in

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<sup>26</sup> Pope Alexander IV’s excommunication letter was sent to Florence on October 7, 1258, and is available in both Latin and its vernacular version; see Cella, “L’epistola sulla morte di Tesauro,” 191. The Pope’s excommunication letter here cited is taken from George Christian Gebauer, *Leben und denkwürdige*, 567–69; as previously noted, Gebauer’s transcription contains errors, so I revised a few passages; the English translation is mine.

Florence and of the intrigues between the Guelfs and Ghibellines in Tuscany. One of the letters, likely written by Brunetto and sent to the Pope, takes a particularly aggressive stance against the Cardinal Ubaldino degli Ottaviani and most notably self-describes Florence as an honorable city:

...Domino O(ttaviano) Sancte Marie in via Lata Diacono Cardinali, qui diabolica suggestione vexatus...fecit enim conspirationem cum Senatore Urbis M(anfredo) P(ersecutore) dictae E(cclesiae) Rom(anae)...voluit nos...civitatem totam ignibus concremare, non curans de puerorum excidio, de mulierum interitu, de occisione senium, et aliorum quam plurium innocentium quorum non posset numerus definiri, et de ruina tam *inclite* civitatis. Et crudelis intentio et nephanda concitatio et iniqua, et sceleratus cogitatus non in Domino sed in Belzebuc principe infernorum....

[...The Lord Ottaviano of Saint Mary in Via Lata Cardinal Deacon, who provoked by diabolic counsel...created a conspiracy with Manfred the Senator of the city and persecutor of the Church of Rome...wants to burn up our entire city with flames, unconcerned with the slaughter of children, the devastation of women, the killing of the elders, and of many other more innocent people whose number cannot be defined, and the fall of so illustrious a city. And the cruel intention and nefarious, wicked impetuosity, and heinous thought are not from God but from Belzebub Prince of Hell....]<sup>27</sup>

Through hyperbolic language, this letter is notable because it is reminiscent of the one sent to Pavia and bombastically includes positive epithets such as “*inclite civitas*” [honorable city] to describe Florence. In his letter, the Pope resumes these positive epithets previously used by Brunetto, but filtered them through his caustic sarcasm. He thus mimics Brunetto’s ironic remarks to the Pavesans, who were addressed earlier as “great and prudent men.” He even employs a pun on the proper name “Florence,” as Brunetto does with Tesauro, by suggesting to substitute the original name of the city (which literally means “flowering” or “flower”) with a term that, although it sounds very similar, means quite the opposite: “*Flere*” [grief and sorrow]. He even goes a step further by asserting that this new name will be more appropriate for the destiny that lies ahead of Florence. The letter also includes numerous Biblical references such as Genesis 4:10, where the “*vox sanguinis*” [the voice of the blood] of the slain innocent Abel cries out to God from the Earth. At the end, the Pope alludes to the same curse against the Florentine citizens and his posterity previously launched by the Pavesans in their letter.

Overall, by appropriating the same expressions from both the Pavesan and Florentine letters, through sarcasm and Biblical citations Alexander IV finally ends the dispute with an interdict against Florence. The papal interdiction

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27 G. Levi, “Il Cardinale Ottaviano degli Ubaldini,” 290; italics mine.

played a crucial role in fueling the credibility of the Ghibelline expatriates Guido Novello and Farinata degli Uberti, who immediately organized a revolt against Florence with the help of Siena and King Manfred. The revolt finally favored the Ghibellines, who with the Battle of Montaperti defeated the Guelf government in Florence involved in Tesauro's murder, forcing Brunetto into exile (1260).

Was the Abbot guilty or innocent? Despite the fact that he was canonized, Dante too shared Brunetto's contempt when decades later he places Saint Tesauro in the depths of hell.<sup>28</sup> To this day, the original letter sent by Brunetto to Pavia is nowhere to be found, and it is reasonable to believe that it could have been destroyed by the angry Pavesans. The place of Tesauro's burial is also another mystery, since some sources claim that the Abbot's remains are in the Vallombrosa Abbey near Florence, while others mention the Church of Saint Lanfranco in Pavia (Robolini 196). One may wonder if there is indeed a sequel to this intrigue, and if Brunetto's sarcastic humor with wordplay (which is also often employed by Dante in many cantos of his *Comedy*) could also be applied to the title of his major work: *The Book of Treasure* and its Italian version *Il tesoretto* [the small treasure] that were written while Brunetto was experiencing his exile as a direct consequence for this incidence with the homonymous "Tesauro" [Treasure].<sup>29</sup> If the choice of the title of this work was motivated by irony, it seems that sarcasm continued to play an important role in Brunetto Latini's life and subsequent works. This could further corroborate the assessment of thirteenth-century chronicler Salimbene de Adam, who wrote that Florentines are "solatiosi et maximi truffatores" [humorous men and great jokers].<sup>30</sup> Nevertheless, as shown thus far, sarcasm here played a role beyond a simple joke, because it fluctuated among both Guelfs and Ghibellines, kings and popes, religious and laymen. As such, it functioned within the diplomatic complexities

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<sup>28</sup> Dante, *Inferno* XXXII 118–119.

<sup>29</sup> To my knowledge, only Holloway addressed the issue of the title in Brunetto's major work, suggesting the possibility that it could likely imply a humorous pun with the proper name of the Abbot "Treasure" of Vallombrosa, see Holloway, *Twice-Told Tales*, 8. Considering that the incident of the murder of the Abbot was the main *casus belli* for the devastating Battle of Montaperti, it is likely that Brunetto could have intended the title as a sarcastic nod to the whole incident while in exile from Florence. In other words, he could have named his work "Treasure" to imply that his own work was the true treasure intended by Matthew 6:19–21, rather than the one advocated by the Ghibellines. Considering Brunetto's use of sarcasm and humor throughout his fictional and non-fictional works, the fact that he boldly chose to use the controversial term "Tesoro" (which could have easily evoked this infamous incident to his contemporaries) suggests that this could not be a mere coincidence.

<sup>30</sup> Salimbene de Adam, *Cronica*, ed. Giuseppe Scalia, Corpus Christianorum: Continuatio Mediaevalis 125 (Turnhout: Brepols, 1998–1999), I: 119.

of the time and served the important function of denouncing deceit, crime, and treason.

Another vibrant example of the practical value of sarcasm within a political context is found in Brunetto's pupil Dante Alighieri, the celebrated author of the *Comedy*. His treatise *Monarchia* constitutes an important example of the use of sarcasm for a political purpose. Written most likely around 1314–18, when the contrast between the papal and imperial powers was reaching alarming proportions throughout fourteenth-century Italy, *Monarchia* plays an important role in addressing crucial issues of the time such as justice and political power.<sup>31</sup> Dante states that he wrote this treatise in order to investigate the legitimacy of the monarchic rule on Earth, the means by which the Roman people establish its power, and the source of political authority.<sup>32</sup> Each of these questions is respectively examined in detail in the three books that compose the entire work. The Bull *Si fratrum* (1317) of Pope John XXII is the document that possibly spurred Dante to write this treatise, as the Pope boldly claimed political supremacy over the Roman Emperor and prohibited all lords of Italy from retaining or assuming titles such as Vicar of the Emperor.<sup>33</sup> The bull thus intensified the controversy around the relationship between the papacy and the Holy Roman Emperor, involving also Dante's patron, Can Grande della Scala, the Imperial Vicar of Verona.

While Dante employs sarcasm sporadically throughout his essay, in the opening of Book Two he explicitly provides readers with a defense for its use by supporting its legitimacy through the practice of criticism. With its explicit promotion in favor of ridicule, this passage has received little attention from scholars.<sup>34</sup> However, the presence of this apologia of sarcasm is central within the framework of Dante's *Monarchia*. It is also remarkable that Dante himself approaches this political question on a personal level. This is evident through the incipit of this section, where the Florentine poet discloses an important confession:

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<sup>31</sup> Scholars have often debated about its official date of composition; for a good overview of various viewpoints, see Anthony K. Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy: An Historical Study with Accompanying Translations of Dante Alighieri's Monarchia, Guido Vernani's Refutation of the "Monarchia" Composed by Dante, and Pope John XXII's Bull 'Si fratrum'* (Washington: The Catholic University of America Press, 2004), 203.

<sup>32</sup> See Dante's *Monarchia* Book I, chapter 2.

<sup>33</sup> Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 21–22.

<sup>34</sup> A few studies have provided a close reading of this passage of the *Monarchia*; see in particular Paola Allegretti and Guglielmo Gorni, "Dante 'con liberale animo dona' (Boccaccio): il nome dell'autore e altri elementi proemiali nella *Monarchia*," *Studi Danteschi* 75 (2010): 69.

Sicut ad faciem cause non pertinentes novum effectum comunitur admiramur, sic, cum causam cognoscimus, eos qui sunt in admiratione restantes quadam *derisione* despiciamus. Admirabar equidem aliquando romanum populum in orbe terrarum sine ulla resistentia fuisse prefectum, cum, tantum superficialiter intuens, illum nullo iure sed armorum tantummodo violentia obtinuisse arbitrabar. Sed postquam medullitus oculos mentis inflexi et per efficacissima signa divinam providentiam hoc effecisse cognovi, admiratione cedente, *derisive* quedam supervenit despectio, cum gentes noverim contra romani populi preheminentiam fremuisse, cum videam populos vana meditantes, ut ipse solebam, cum insuper doleam reges et principes in hoc unico concordantes: ut adversentur Domino suo et Uncto suo, romano principi. (II.2–3)

[Just as we are generally amazed at some strange effect because we cannot see its cause, and when we do learn the cause we look down with a certain derision upon others who are left marveling, so I indeed once used to puzzle how the Roman people had been, without resistance at all, appointed to rule over the whole globe of the earth. Since I was considering it only superficially, I judged that they had obtained this not de jure but merely by force of arms. But when I fixed the eyes of my mind to its innermost part, I came to understand by the most compelling signs that divine providence had accomplished it, and, as my wonder waned, a certain derisive scorn overcame me as I observed how the Gentiles raged against the preeminence of the Roman people when I saw the people devising vain things (as I used to do); and I grieved above all that kings and princes agreed on one thing only: on defying their Lord and his anointed, the Roman prince.]<sup>35</sup>

As he frequently does in the *Comedy*, here too Dante offers readers an intriguing simile.<sup>36</sup> The simile is articulated first from the wider perspective of humanity, and then to the more personal viewpoint of the individual. This opening of Book Two also recalls the opening of his *Comedy*, as it starts by addressing “us” and “we” and then switches to the individual “I.”<sup>37</sup> The imagery here provided in *Monarchia* is that of a man who, after initially being amazed from experiencing an unusual event, realizes its cause and then mocks the ignorance of others, because they are still stuck in the first stage of amazement. Through this metaphor, Dante justifies the act of mockery as the primal reaction against the ignorance both in ourselves and what we find mirrored in others. Furthermore, this realization is achieved through a deep reflection, which goes beyond a superficial assessment, and can only be experienced by the individual alone. The fact that this final understanding is expressed not by compassion, but by

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35 The Latin text of the *Monarchia* is taken from Dante, *Monarchia*, ed. Federico Sanguineti, (Milan: Garzanti, 1985). Sanguinetti utilizes the standard edition established by Pier Giorgio Ricci. The English translation is from Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 128. Italics are mine.

36 See for example at the opening of the *Inferno*, when Dante introduces the imagery of the exhausted man who crosses a stormy river and looks back to observe the danger that he has just passed, thus learning from his observation; Dante, *Inferno* 1.22–27.

37 Dante, *Inferno* 1.1–2.



scorn is notable because it suggests that Dante envisions mockery as a legitimate act when projected first against ourselves and our own limitations that we see expressed in others. Within the context of the *Monarchia*, Dante then discloses his initial amazement about the successful endeavor of the Roman people in establishing world supremacy. After a deep reflection, he realizes that they were able to achieve authority, not by their own merit, but rather through divine providence. In other words, political rule is not generated from within by the same source that exerts power, but instead from without by God.<sup>38</sup>

After this realization, Dante then proceeds with disputing those contemporary political rulers who resist the authority of the emperor and God. He widens his apologia of mockery on a biblical level by citing Ps. 2:3, where God laughs at raging nations, rebukes negligent rulers, and urges them to be responsible:

Propter quod derisive, non sine dolore quodam, cum illo clamare possum pro populo glorioso, pro Cesare, qui pro Principe celi clamabat: “Quare fremuerunt gentes, et populi meditati sunt inania? Astiterunt reges terre, et principes convenerunt in unum, adversus Dominum et adversus Christum eius.” Verum quia naturalis amor diuturnam esse *derisionem* non patitur, sed, ut sol estivus qui disiectis nebulis matutinis oriens luculenter irradiat, *derisione* omissa, lucem correctionis effundere mavult, ad dirumpendum vincula ignorantie regum atque principum talium, ad ostendendum genus humanum liberum a iugo ipsorum, cum Propheta sanctissimo me me subsequenter hortabor subsequencia subassumens: “Dirumpamus” videlicet “vincula eorum, et proiciamus a nobis iugum ipsorum.” Hec equidem duo fient sufficienter, si secundam partem presentis propositi prosecutus fuero, et instantis questionis veritatem ostendero. (II.4–6)

[As a result, with some derision and not without a certain grief, I can take up for that glorious people and for Cæsar, the cry of him who cried out for the Prince of Heaven: “Why have the Gentiles raged, and the people devised vain things? The kings of the earth stood up, and the princes met together, against the Lord, and against his Christ.” But since natural love cannot suffer derision to last for long, for—like the summer sun, which, upon rising, scatters the morning clouds and shines out radiantly—it dismisses scorn and prefers to put forth the light of correction; to break the chain of ignorance of such kings and princes and to show forth human kind free of their yoke, I shall cheer myself along with the most Holy Prophet whom I imitate in repeating the following words, to wit: “Let us break their bonds asunder: and let us cast away their yoke from us.” These two things, anyway, will be fulfilled when I have completed the second part of my present plan and when I have shown the truth of the question at hand.] (Cassell 128–29)

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**38** This same idea expressed by Dante finds also application in many modern electoral democracies. Even though the concept is today secularized, electoral democracies are based on the system of election, through which a political leader achieves power by the people and not by exerting force; see Melvin Edelstein, *The French Revolution and the Birth of Electoral Democracy* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014).



This entire portion is significant for three main reasons. Firstly, by linking mockery and indignation to the biblical tradition Dante approaches sarcasm not as a mere quirk or joke. Instead, he blends the contrasting reaction of “derisio” with indignation and “dolore” [grief], motivating its use. He even resorts to providing a biblical example where God Himself employs disdain to deride arrogant rulers who think that they can rule in their own name. He thus seeks to demonstrate that mockery is a viable tool and is the appropriate human response in the face of a serious situation, because it brings awareness while promoting political stability.

Secondly, Dante clearly emphasizes the importance of derision within the current situation, not only by using terms such as “derisione” multiple times, but also by framing his main discussion with verbs in the present tense. As noted by Gustavo Vinay, though at the beginning of the passage Dante uses subjunctive verbs in the past tense (e.g., “fuisse,” “noverim” and “fremuisse”), he then continues by using verbs mainly in the present tense (“videam,” “meditantes” and “patitur”) interpolated with the future tense (“hortabor”).<sup>39</sup> By creating this contrast between the past, the present, and the future, he seeks to emphasize the problems of the current political situation of his time, characterized by division and instability. This division is particularly stated in connection to political leaders and their plans to subvert the united political model of the empire by joining forces amongst themselves for their own personal gain. This reference has been linked to the fierce resistance against the establishment of a holy Roman Emperor and a Roman Empire in Italy during 1314, as it was attempted by Ludwig IV of Bavaria and Frederick the Fair of Austria. Both contenders were nominated Roman Emperors and kings of Germany in the same month of November by different prominent clergy and lay members, thus arousing much controversy and division in Italy.<sup>40</sup> Dante explicitly refers to this highly disputed 1314 election in Book Three of *Monarchia*, where he criticizes the electors’ disagreement, which caused this momentous split.<sup>41</sup> Within this context, it is clear why Dante then uses verbs in the present tense (“possum”) to describe the ancient Roman Empire and Cæsar, since he projects its establishment in

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39 Dante Alighieri, *Monarchia. Testo introduzione, traduzione e commento*, ed. Gustavo Vinay (Florence: Sansoni, 1950), XXXIV-XXXVI.

40 Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 23; see also Henry Stephen Lucas, “The Low Countries and the Disputed Imperial Election of 1314,” *Speculum* 21 (1946): 72–114.

41 *Monarchia* 3:16:14. This datum provides important evidence for the dating of *Monarchia* after the death of Henry VII of Luxemburg in late 1313. Henry VII was unanimously approved as Holy Roman Emperor even by Pope Clement V; see Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 230, note 3.

Italy during his own time through the office of the Holy Roman Emperor.<sup>42</sup> By doing so, he supplies a model of a political ideal which he believes is not distant in time, but accessible to his contemporaries in the near future. The main purpose of *Monarchia* is thus to urge readers to respond to the present political instability in Italy through both opposition and action. Overall, according to Dante, derision is a necessary tool to approach the present because it unveils wrongdoing and finally implements the “*lucem correctionis*” [the light of correction].

Lastly, with the term “*lucem correctionis*,” Dante makes explicit reference to both the satirical and prophetic traditions.<sup>43</sup> The light mentioned, which references God’s grace, is remarkably linked to the term “*correctionis*” and exposes the ethics of correcting vices: “*lucem correctionis effundere*” [to put forth the light of correction]. Such terminology refers to the concept of *satira* as Dante—and his early commentators—conceived it. It is not coincidental that many definitions of medieval satire routinely use expressions such as “*reprehensio correctoria*” or “*reprehensio correctiva*” [corrective reproach] as one of the main traits of satires. Furthermore, satirists were often defined as “*derisores*” [mockers].<sup>44</sup> The prophetic tradition also constitutes a crucial element in Dante’s *Monarchia*. Here Dante evokes prophets such as Isaiah and other biblical sources, such as Ps. 2:3 and Acts 4:26–27. His hyperbolic language (such as “*clamare*” and “*clamabat*” or “to cry out”), as well as his poetic metaphors (such as the beautiful imagery of the summer sun which recalls Revelation 22:5), convey both the derision and assertiveness of Dante’s call to his contemporaries, which consciously employs mockery for a limited time (“*derisionem non patitur*”). Ridicule and indignation are thus required to deliver the author’s message, but they do not constitute the purpose of the attack—only the means to achieve it. Hence, Dante provides a sort of apology for the functional value of sarcasm and indignation, which both recur throughout subsequent passages of his *Monarchia*.<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 304.

<sup>43</sup> The connection between this passage of the *Monarchia* with the satirical tradition has been mentioned by Nicolino Applauso, “Curses and Laughter: The Ethics of Political Invective in the Comic Poetry of High and Late Medieval Italy” (doctoral thesis, University of Oregon, 2010), 374–76; and more recently by Ambrogio Camozzi Pistoja, “Il quarto trattato del Convivio o della satira,” *Le tre corone* 1 (2014): 27–28.

<sup>44</sup> Suzanne Reynolds, “Dante and the medieval theory of satire: A collection of texts,” *Libri poetarum in quattuor species dividuntur: Essays on Dante and genre*, ed. Zygmunt G. Barański, *The Italianist*. Supplement 15 (1995): 145–57.

<sup>45</sup> As Cassell notes, in Books Two and Three of the *Monarchia* “Dante does rise to the patriarchal pitch of a weary Old Testament prophet and psalmist, and at other places to a magisterial irritation and sarcasm.” (*The Monarchia Controversy* 25). A clear example of Dante’s sarcasm in the *Monarchia* is evident in Book Three, 3:17. Here Dante launches a sardonic attack against the

This mixture of satire and prophecy is put into practice in fictional terms in the *Comedy*, most notably in the *Paradiso* canticle. Here one can find many examples of sarcasm, irony, and mockery. Canto 21 of *Paradiso* includes one of the most eloquent examples of this satirical and prophetic vision theorized in the second book of the *Monarchia*. Dante unleashes what scholars have considered one of the most memorable anticlerical images of the entire poem through the character of the prelate Peter Damian. At the end of the canto, he launches a derisive attack against the corrupt clergy of Dante's time by introducing the comical persona of the fourteenth-century pastor:

"Venne Cefàs e venne il gran vasello  
de lo Spirito Santo, magri e scalzi,  
prendendo il cibo da qualunque ostello. 129

Or voglion quinci e quindi chi rinalzi,  
li moderni pastori e chi li meni,  
tanto son gravi,e chi di dietro li alzi. 132

Cuopron d'i manti loro i palafreni,  
sì che due bestie van sott' una pelle:  
oh pazienza che tanto sostieni!" 135

["Cephas came, and the exalted vessel  
of the Holy Spirit came, lean and barefoot,  
receiving their food at any doorway.

Now our modern shepherds call for one on this side,  
one on that, to support them, they are so bloated,  
and one to go before, one to boost them from behind.

Their fur-lined mantles hang upon their horses' flanks  
so that two beasts go underneath one skin.  
O patience, what a heavy load you bear!"<sup>46</sup>

Peter compares the way of life of Cefàs [St. Peter] to the one led by modern priests. St. Peter is the primary model for the Pope and lived a modest life by walking barefoot and by being satisfied to scrounge for food wherever he found it (Luke 10:7). On the contrary, the modern cleric is depicted as an over-

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Guelfs who "bedecked with crow feathers make an ostentatious display of themselves as white sheep in the flock of the Lord. These, the sons of iniquity, who, so that they may perpetrate their shameful crimes, prostitute their mother, expel their brothers, and then refuse to submit to a judge." (cited from Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 153).

<sup>46</sup> All citations from Dante's *Commedia* are taken from Giorgio Petrocchi's edition, *La Commedia secondo l'antica vulgata* (Milan: Mondadori, 1966–67). The English translation is from Robert and Jean Hollander, eds. and trans. *Dante Alighieri: Paradiso* (New York: Doubleday, 2007), 515.

weight person in need of being carried around by his servants, who struggle to move him around for the enormous size of his belly and buttocks. Furthermore, special attention is given to the pastor's unfortunate horse, which is comically depicted as slumping under the heavy weight of the obese man. For his excessively ample and elegant mantle, the clergyman is covered together with his horse so that both rider and horse are sneeringly said to look like two beasts with one skin. The final expression of disdain is reminiscent of the opening of Book Two of *Monarchia*, since here again sarcasm is no longer enough to respond to the present situation, and thus Peter invokes God Himself through the expression "O patience, what a heavy load you bear!" The expression supplies an additional meaning, and perhaps even wordplay, to the imagery of weightiness previously introduced, through the verb "sostieni" [bear], as it calls into play divine justice. The "lucem correctionis" is then explicitly invoked, and perhaps even restored, at the close of the canto with the final imagery of the glowing lights created by the souls of heaven that surround Peter and furiously glow with indignation: "Fiammelle / di grado in grado scendere e girarsi / e ogn' giro le facea più belle." [Flickering flames / descend, spinning from rung to rung, / at every turn more lovely] (136–38). These flashing lights are also accompanied by a loud cry, whose terrible sound overwhelms Dante the pilgrim, leaving him dumbfounded (*Par.* 21, 139–42). This spectacular scene is also very reminiscent of other subsequent cantos in the *Paradiso*, such as Canto 27, where Dante introduces Cefàs himself, who, while launching his derisive invective, is surrounded by divine indignation from above the sky as previously expressed through Ps. 2:3 in the *Monarchia*.

One may wonder what was the reaction to such explicit sarcastic and contentious remarks launched by Dante in both his *Comedy* and *Monarchia*. Even though Dante enjoyed immediate popularity upon the publication of his *Comedy*, the reception of the *Monarchia* became highly controversial only after his death. As outlined by the fourteenth-century author Giovanni Boccaccio, Dante's political treatise was little known until it was revived during the violent conflict between Ludwig IV the Bavarian and Pope John XXII between 1327 and 1328.<sup>47</sup> During these years, against the wishes of Pope John XXII, the excommunicated Ludwig IV descended to Italy and was first crowned King of Italy in Milan and then Holy Roman Emperor in Rome by his newly nominated antipope, Peter della Corbara. Dante's *Monarchia* started to be used by Ludwig IV and his allies to discredit the Pope's authority, but his political schemes soon failed thanks to the influence of the Cardinal and papal inquisitor, Bertrand du Poujet. Through

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<sup>47</sup> Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 37–38.

his stern methods, Cardinal Bertrand was able to win public opinion in Rome and aroused the Roman people against Ludwig IV, who was forced to withdraw from the city. At the conclusion of this skirmish, the papal legate declared Dante's *Monarchia* a heretical work and prohibited its use everywhere, ultimately staging its public burning in Bologna during 1328.<sup>48</sup> It comes as no surprise that many early manuscripts of the *Monarchia* conceal Dante's name from the cover page, because its popularity was mainly caused by its controversial use as imperial propaganda, and such discretion was motivated by the aggressive stance taken by papal inquisitors.<sup>49</sup>

During this time, most likely in 1329, Friar Guido Vernani wrote *De reprobatione monarchie composite a Dante* [*The Refutation of the Monarchia Composed by Dante*], the official reply written to confute Dante's influential political treatise. From the very beginning of his *De reprobatione*, Vernani sets a sarcastic tone by including a witty dedication to the prominent Bolognese clerk of the court and notary, Graziolo de' Bambaglioli, one of the most enthusiastic supporters of Dante's *Comedy*:

Suo carissimo filio Gratiolo de Bambajolis Nobilis Communis Bononiae Cancellario, Fr. Guido Vernanus de Arimino Ordinis Praedicatorum salutem, et sic transire per bona temporalia, ut nou perdantur aeterna.

[To Graziolo de' Bambaglioli, greetings from Fra Guido Vernani of Rimini, of the Order of Preachers, to his most beloved son and chancellor of the noble Commune of Bologna, that he may so pass through earthly goods that he may not lose those eternal.]<sup>50</sup>

Only apparently mellow, Vernani's exhortation to Graziolo to hold dear his earthly goods hides the mordant sarcastic warning that, by doing so, he may lose his eternal life. The term "bona temporalia" [earthly goods] refers to Dante's works, here associated to the sinful reality of earthly things, in contrast to the holy eternity of the soul in heaven, which Vernani suggests that Graziolo is at risk of losing to the flames of hell. During Vernani's time, the Bolognese people were certainly aware of the staunch defense of Dante's works exercised by Graziolo. The Bolognese Chancellor wrote one of the first Latin commentaries of Dante's *Comedy*, which circulated in Bologna from 1324 on during Cardinal Bertrand's cru-

<sup>48</sup> An excellent study on Dante and heresy is Maria Picchio Simonelli, "L'inquisizione e Dante: alcuni osservazioni," *Dante Studies* 97 (1979): 129–49.

<sup>49</sup> Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 41–42.

<sup>50</sup> The Latin text is taken from *Contro Dante (Contra Dantem)*: Fr. Guidonis Vernani, *Tractatus de reprobatione Monarchiae: Composite a Dante Alighiero Florentino*, ed. G. Piccini (Florence: Bemporad, 1906). The English translation is from Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 174.

sade against heretics throughout Italy, which culminated with the said public burning of Dante's *Monarchia* in 1328. Thus, Vernani's sarcastic remark might have contained a more serious warning, considering that during these years the poet and intellectual, Cecco D'Ascoli, was burned at the stake after being condemned for heresy because of the ideas expressed in his *Acerba*. Vernani could have launched the malicious implication that Graziolo, too is in danger of being burned alive for his heartfelt defense of Dante's controversial works.

This dedication establishes the eminently sarcastic tone that recurs throughout his entire essay, as evident by the presence of numerous caustic remarks. Vernani frequently persists in criticizing the content of the *Monarchia* and its author by using terms such as "quidam" [a certain individual], "ille homo" or "ille" [that fellow] or "iste homo," "sophista verbosus" [wordy scammer], as well as "vile et derisibile argumentum" [vile and laughable evidence], or "verba ampullosa" [inflated rhetoric].<sup>51</sup> A clear example of Vernani's mocking stance is notable in his statement about Dante's passage at the opening of Book Two of the *Monarchia*. Here the friar vehemently derides Dante's claim to "clamare" [invoke] God and his pseudo-prophetic act of raising his voice to the highest: "Here the wretch [Dante] reached the heights of his delirium: as he raised his mouth to heaven, his tongue lolled along the ground."<sup>52</sup>

Similarly to what has been observed with Brunetto's and Alexander IV's letters, both *Monarchia* and *De reprobatione* show how intellectuals such as Dante or promoters of both imperial and papal propaganda democratically employed irony as a double-edged sword to defend and attack their respective opponents. Within this frame, sarcasm holds a prominent place, not only as the guiding principle or managing tool to approach abuse, but also as an exemplary practice associated with divine providence and could successfully provide a response against political division and human greed, nurturing responsibility and dialogue among individuals, community members, or political and religious leaders. However, frequently sarcasm goes unnoticed. The only way not to lose track of the presence of sarcasm within these texts is to be familiar with the historical context. Once the sarcasm is detected and contextualized, the text not only becomes more alive, but resumes its dynamic polemical nature and finally allows readers to become more intimate with its full original meaning.

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51 Cited from Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 342, note 8; and Richard Kay, "The Intended Readers of Dante's 'Monarchia,'" *Dante Studies* 110 (1992): 37–44, 40.

52 Cited from Cassell, *The Monarchia Controversy*, 188.

Debra E. Best

## “A lowed laghtur that lady logh”

### Laughter, Snark, and Sarcasm in Middle English Romance

Middle English romance frequently concerns the hero's quest to prove himself worthy of marriage and kingship, as he wins the lady and gains or regains his lands and inherited family status. He does so through his prowess in battle and his increasing adherence to the code of chivalry, which is, as Richard Kaeuper notes, both a “code of violence” focused on deeds performed in heroic work “with lance and sword,” and a “code of restraint” governing a knight's behavior.<sup>1</sup> The hero's harsh words towards other characters, exemplified most obviously in the formulaic boasts before battle, are the verbal equivalent to the physical violence, and the amount of control present in those words indicates the degree to which the hero has achieved that restraint.

The harsh words between characters may be characterized as “snark.” In addition to its occurrence as a part of the conventions for battle and single-combat, snark also can be part of the witty sparring coming between characters as they forge a relationship, as in the exchanges between Shakespeare's Beatrice and Benedick or film's Tracy and Hepburn. At its most basic level, “snarky,” a term, of course, anachronistic to the Middle Ages, can be defined as “irritable, short-tempered,”<sup>2</sup> and this quality appears in an unworthy opponent or an unproven knight who lacks restraint. It often makes the audience laugh *at* the figure. In contrast, when the hero has matured, gaining prowess and chivalry, the audience laughs *with* the hero, whose words exhibit a broader definition of snarky, which draws upon the American meaning of “sarcastic, impertinent, or irreverent in tone or manner.”<sup>3</sup> The snark then may take the form of a witty putdown, and this verbal marker elevates the hero and signals his maturation and, frequently, his victory. In parallel to his progress towards chivalry, the youthful, unproven hero delivers an irritable, unrestrained snarkiness, while a chivalric knight has enough control over language to put down his opponents with wit

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1 Richard Kaeuper, “The Societal Role of Chivalry in Romance: Northwestern Europe,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval Romance*, ed. Roberta L. Krueger (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 99-100.

2 *Oxford English Dictionary*. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at <http://www.oed.com/>.

3 Merriam-Webster's Collegiate Dictionary. 11th ed. Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, 2003. Also available at <http://www.merriam-webster.com/>.

and humor. Put another way, the unproven hero uses a type of sarcasm that is closer to its origins; as noted in the introduction, the Greek *sarkasmos* comes from *sarkasein* “to tear flesh.” The hero’s use of sarcasm evolves as the word does, developing more into a type of language play, which both defines divisions and produces a form of bonding.

In tales of the fair unknown, short-tempered snarkiness establishes both the unknown youth’s immaturity and the division of social class and rank. The audience laughs at the brash child of dubious parentage who must prove his worth and when the young man’s rustic background conflicts with his innate courtliness or his attempts at knighthood. In the most well-known instance of this plot device, Perceval transitions “from bumpkin to Grail hero,” as Norris Lacy puts it.<sup>4</sup> In the Middle English *Sir Perceval of Galles*, when Perceval encounters three of Arthur’s knights in the forest, he at first confuses them for gods, humorously showing his ignorance of social hierarchy, and when Gawain courteously says they are not, Perceval responds brashly: “I sall sla yow all three / Bot ye smertly now telle mee / Whatkyns thynges that ye bee, / Sen ye no goddes are.”<sup>5</sup> [“I shall slay all three of you unless you now tell me promptly what kinds of things that you are since you are not gods.”] Kay responds sarcastically, showing both his own more mature command of language and his own failings as a chivalric knight: “Who solde we than say / That hade slayne us to-day / In this holtis hare?”<sup>6</sup> [“Who should we then say had slain us today in this gray wood?”] This brief question signals Kay’s snark and sarcasm in three ways: verbally and explicitly, verbally but implicitly, and contextually. Clearly, the knights cannot declare who killed them if they are dead. The wording further implies that, in the hierarchy of knighthood, Perceval is a nobody. In this context, the ludicrous threat that an unarmed and unarmored “peasant” would be able to kill a group of well-armed knights suggests a tone of mockery. Gawain then explicitly admonishes Kay for his “prowde wordes,”<sup>7</sup> that is, the “proud words” that indicate Kay values himself above the other because of his “position, rank, attainments, possessions”<sup>8</sup> and that come across as sarcasm towards the young man who would become knight. Nevertheless, Perceval deserves Kay’s response, since he ridicu-

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4 Norris Lacy, “Perceval,” in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia* (New York: Routledge, 1996), 356.

5 “Sir Perceval of Galles” in *Sir Perceval of Galles and Ywain and Gawain*, ed. Mary Flowers Braswell (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1995), lines 293–296. [All translations are my own.]

6 “Sir Perceval of Galles,” lines 298–300.

7 “Sir Perceval of Galles,” line 306.

8 Oxford English Dictionary. 2nd ed. 20 vols. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989. Also available at <http://www.oed.com/>



lously says he will kill them if they do not identify themselves. Kay's "proude wordes" may contrast with Gawain's courtesy, but they also signal Perceval's ignorance of convention and establish a necessary distance in his relationship with the knights, since the interloper has not yet proven himself worthy of knighthood. Becoming a member of King Arthur's court by no means guarantees that a knight is fully mature, however. Sir Kay is the snarkiest of all knights. Known for his churlishness, especially for any fair unknown who enters Arthur's court, his behavior frequently serves to contrast with the courtesy of Gawain and other knights.<sup>9</sup> Perceval's encounter with the three knights thus shows three phases in a knight's command of language: the attacking snark, the sarcastic response, and the restraint of a fully chivalric leader who knows not to wield words against a child.

This text's narrator, moreover, draws the audience into participating in the snark, further delineating the social classes. Perceval's immature actions and words seemed designed to make the reader laugh, placing him or her in the same position as Kay, a position both superior to the one who is being laughed at but not at the same level as the courtly figures, such as Gawain, who are above ridiculing their inferiors. Perceval continues to amuse when he comes to believe that all horses are mares.<sup>10</sup> When he enters Arthur's court, he shows his ignorance of decorum and social rank when he goes forward and, the narrator says, "Kyste the forhevede of the Kynge,"<sup>11</sup> [kissed the forehead of the king.] Perceval harshly demands that he be knighted, saying, "'Bot if the Kyng make me knyghte / I sall hym here slaa!'"<sup>12</sup> ["Unless the king makes me a knight, I will slay him here!"] The lack of restraint in his actions and words makes him the focus of laughter, while it also reveals his humble upbringing, ironically, at the same time in court that Arthur recognizes him as his noble father's son. These brash exchanges and showings of ignorance continue as Perceval shows his natural martial abilities, slowly gains knowledge of conventions, and matures into a chivalric, restrained knight.

The Middle English *Octavian* similarly shows how laughter can be used to mark such a transformation. When young Florent proves his worth by defeating a giant who demands the hand of a sultan's daughter, laughter shifts from indicating Florent is a subject of ridicule to indicating pleasure about victory. This change signals the hero's coming of age and acceptance by the community. Flor-

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9 Norris Lacy and Geoffrey Ashe with Debra N. Mancoff, *The Arthurian Handbook*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 1997), 326, and John L. Grisby, "Kay," in *The New Arthurian Encyclopedia*, 259.

10 "Sir Perceval of Galles," lines 369–372.

11 "Sir Perceval of Galles," line 495.

12 "Sir Perceval of Galles," lines 527–28.

ent's battle with the giant follows the conventions of single-combat, beginning with the arming scene and including an exchange of blows, the lady's observation of the battle, and the giant's decapitation and the presentation of the head,<sup>13</sup> but the entire scene immediately becomes a parody of such battles. When the unknown Florent enters in rusty armor to fight the giant, the court laughs and describes him as a noble knight, demonstrating the use of sarcasm as scornfully saying the opposite of what one means:

All that abowte the gates stode,  
 Loughe so faste thay were nere wode,  
 And skornede hym that tyde.  
 Ilk a man sayde to his fere,  
 "Here comes a doghety bachelere,  
 Hym semes full wele to ryde;  
 Men may see by hys brene bryghte  
 That he es a nobylle knyghte  
 The geaunt for to habyde!"<sup>14</sup>

[All who stood around the gates  
 Laughed so hard that they were nearly crazy (with laughter),  
 And scorned him that time.  
 Each man said to his companion,  
 "Here comes a valiant young knight,  
 He seems to ride very well;  
 Men may see by his shining armor  
 That he is a noble knight  
 (Who has come) to encounter the giant!"]

The laughter and sarcasm give the audience power over what they cannot control. Their champion appears incapable of defending them, so they diminish their hero themselves, while they use sarcasm to describe what they wish he were—a valiant young knight in shining armor—rather than what appears to be a peasant wearing rusty armor. Ironically, Florent really is of noble blood. Readers know that, and the dramatic irony gives them power over the moment.

Florent has power over this mocking moment, as well, since the arming scene demonstrates a certain ability to laugh at himself that defeats any external

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<sup>13</sup> Albert C. Baugh, "Convention and Individuality in the Middle English Romance," in *Literature and Folklore Studies*, ed. Jerome Mandel and Bruce A. Rosenberg (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1971) and Susan Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures of Middle English Romance* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> "Octavian," in *Four Middle English Romances*, ed. Harriet Hudson, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), lines 986–994.

condemnation. Putting on rusty armor proves to be a challenge, and the man who raised him, Clement, breaks his nose just getting the sword out of the scabbard:

Clement drewe the swerd, bot owte it nolde;  
 Gladwyn his wyfe sold the schawebereke holde,  
 And bothe righte faste thay drewe.  
 And when the swerde owte glente,  
 Bothe vnto the erthe thay went—  
 Than was ther gamen ynoghe.  
 Clement felle to the bynke so faste  
 That mouthe and nose al tobraste,  
 And Florente stode and loghe.  
 Grete gamen it es to telle  
 How thay bothe to the erthe felle,  
 And Clement laye in swoghe.<sup>15</sup>

[Clement attempted to draw the sword, but it would not come out;  
 Gladwyn his wife held the scabbard,  
 And they both pulled very firmly.  
 And when the sword came out,  
 They both fell onto the earth —  
 Then there was enough amusement.  
 Clement fell against the bench so hard  
 That his mouth and nose both shattered,  
 And Florent stood and laughed.  
 It is a great joke to tell  
 How they both fell to the earth,  
 And Clement lay unconcious.]

Florent laughs at the physical humor, what the narrator refers to as a "grete gamen," and although Clement seems to laugh with him, Florent shows some snarkiness towards the man who raised him. To a certain extent, his laughter separates him from the rustics and aligns him with the community who watches him fight the giant. Both Martha Fessler Krieg and John Simons have noted the relationship between humor and social class in *Octavian*.<sup>16</sup> "Grete gamen," though, indicates that none of this humor is mean. They are all laughing togeth-

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<sup>15</sup> "Octavian," lines 947–958.

<sup>16</sup> Martha Fessler Krieg, "The Contrast of Class Customs as Humor in a Middle English Romance: Clement and Florent in *Octavian*," *Fifteenth-Century Studies* 9 (1984): 115–124, and John Simons, "Northern *Octavian* and the Question of Class," in *Romance in Medieval England*, ed. Maldwyn Mills, Jennifer Fellows, and Carol M. Meale (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1991), 105–112.

er, so Florent can laugh along with those who laugh at his entrance. His response thus paves the way for his rite of passage into the community.

When the audience “loughe” at Florent after the battle, the word’s meaning has clearly shifted: “Alle the folke at the childe loughe, / How he the geaunt hede ofdroghe / When he hade smetyn hym thore.”<sup>17</sup> [All the people laughed or smiled at the young knight and how he chopped off the giant’s head when he had struck him there.] At this point, the single-combat itself has become a parody of battles; the giant continues to fight even after “his righte arme flowe of thore / The blode stremyde than full wyde,”<sup>18</sup> [his right arm flew off there / The blood streamed then very widely.] “Loughe” here signals not only the scene’s comic nature, but also the community’s approval of the victory. “Loughe” can mean either to laugh or to smile, and here the meaning seems to shift towards the latter, signaling the change in the perception of Florent. Instead of laughing at him entering with rusty armor, the crowd now beams proudly at his victory and enjoys the decapitation. Florent has chivalrously saved the lady from an unworthy suitor, proving his own worth and proving his social class, and his ability to join in the snark, self-deprecating as it may be, signals his worthiness.

The lady’s own sarcastic remark when he presents the head, moreover, reveals her acceptance of him. She says, ““He was ay trewe of his hete— / When he the kynges hevede myght not gete / His owen he hase me sende.””<sup>19</sup> [“He was always true of his word. Since he might not get the king’s head, he has sent me his own instead.”] She can joke because she is relieved the giant cannot, as promised, present her with a head as an engagement gift; Florent has saved her from a forced marriage. Her words here enable her to join in and enjoy the giant’s defeat, thus sharing the moment with Florent. United in this victory, Florent kisses her and carries her away. Through their laughter, Florent, the lady, the kingdom, and by extension, the audience all join in the defeat of not only the giant but also the lascivious suitors, inappropriate marriage, and Saracen attackers that he represents.

As in *Octavian*, sarcasm functions in *Sir Eglamour* to indicate both youthfulness and the father-son relationship. Interestingly, when the youthful Eglamour undertakes his three tasks to win his love, Christabel, no sarcasm occurs in their courtship, in his interactions with her father, or, where one would most expect it, in the battlefield boasts. The giants speak and boast, but Eglamour remains si-

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<sup>17</sup> “Octavian,” lines 1043–1045.

<sup>18</sup> “Octavian,” lines 1005–1006.

<sup>19</sup> “Octavian,” lines 1067–1069.

lent. The point of this absence is perhaps that Eglamour has been worthy all along, and only an errant father, as Joanne Charbonneau explains, prohibits their union.<sup>20</sup> Eglamour's long lost son, Degrebell, is sarcastic, however, when they first meet. Travelling to the Holy Land after losing his wife and son, Eglamour encounters a tournament but says he will not fight "For I am come out of hethennesse— / Grete syn it were me to tene."<sup>21</sup> ["Because I have come out of heathenness, it would be a great sin for me to do harm."] Degrebell sarcastically comments that he should not be in armor then: "Then shuld thou not han armed the! / More worschyp had hyt bene."<sup>22</sup> [Then you should not have armed yourself! It would have shown greater worship.] He points out the contradiction of being armed while on a religious pilgrimage, but he does so not by pointing out that true worship and repentance would require Eglamour to give up the armor and the fighting, as one might expect if Degrebell is truly criticizing Eglamour's arming of himself. Rather, he broadens the meaning of the word "worship" to mean that it would be the greater victory, showing greater faith in God, honoring God more, and gaining more honor for himself, if Eglamour were to win his battles without being armed. Eglamour's reaction signals that he recognizes Degrebell's mocking tone and wordplay: "The knyght smyld and on hym lowgh, / 'Hase thou not turneyd yyt inowgh / Butt thou of more me pray?"<sup>23</sup> [The knight smiled and laughed with him, "Have you not fought in the tournament enough, but you have to ask for more from me?"] He turns the mockery back at Degrebell by indicating that Degrebell just wants to play and win the tournament game some more. Degrebell's sarcastic teenage comment and Eglamour's amused response suggest that even when unaware of each other's identities, they behave as and are drawn together as father and son. This humor establishes intimacy, much like the arming scene does with Clement and Florent. The context further signals the appropriate mockery of Eglamour's claims to avoid sin, since he all too readily is persuaded to fight. Eglamour then wins his long lost love, Christabel, resulting in a recognition scene that restores the family. Unlike Eglamour's earlier battles, this scene between father and son has a light tone, appropriate to the reader's anticipation of a happy ending, since only the reader, at this point, is aware of everyone's

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20 Joanne Charbonneau, "Transgressive Fathers in *Sir Eglamour* and *Torrent of Portyngale*," in *Discourses on Love, Marriage, and Transgression in Medieval and Early Modern Literature*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2004), 243–65.

21 "Sir Eglamour," in *Four Middle English Romances*, ed. Harriet Hudson, 2nd ed. (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), lines 1199–1200.

22 "Sir Eglamour," lines 1202–1203.

23 "Sir Eglamour," lines 1204–1206.

identity. The laughter signals that happy ending. In *Eglamour*, Degrebell's sarcasm establishes that he has come of age and is ready to assume his position as Eglamour's son, just as Eglamour's response, laughter and a sarcastic remark about Degrebell's success in the tournament, signals that he is ready to join the community.

In contrast to the laughter turned towards the immature knight, when the knight has proven his worth and gained prowess, chivalry, and maturity, the audience laughs with the hero, who now possesses command of witty putdowns and sarcasm. As Susan Wittig and A.C. Baugh point out in their work on Middle English romance conventions, boasting between knights typically appears in scenes of single combat.<sup>24</sup> Expanding on the work of Norman Susskind, Gerald Herman catalogs the different types of battlefield taunts that create humor in the chansons de geste, noting that "the art of the well-phrased insult attained a veritable flowering in that genre."<sup>25</sup> His list is relevant to Middle English romance, including, for example, "the laughing at an opponent's failings," "expressions of sarcastic scorn," "the use of religious imagery and terminology," the mocking of "the enemy's death or mutilation," and "the offering of mock advice."<sup>26</sup>

The capping insult after an opponent's defeat is more than just taunting, however. It often indicates that the hero has overcome great odds to win, perhaps by killing a giant or large army, and the insult shows his physical prowess accompanied by verbal skill, suggesting a certain intelligence in the now mature hero. In *Sir Perceval of Galles*, Perceval's full maturation is highlighted by his defeat of a giant, whom Perceval taunts after chopping off his hand and his left foot:

"...I undirstande  
 Thou myghte with a lesse wande  
 Hafe weledid better thi hande  
 And hafe done the some gode.  
 ....  
 Of thi fote thou getis no gode;  
 Bot lepe if thou may!"<sup>27</sup>

24 Baugh, "Convention and Individuality in the Middle English Romance" and Wittig, *Stylistic and Narrative Structures of Middle English Romance*.

25 Norman Susskind, "Humor in the Chansons de geste," *Symposium* 25 (1961): 185–197, and Gerald Herman, "The Battlefield Taunt: Violence and Humor in the Chansons de geste," *Annuaire mediaevale* 13 (1972), 125.

26 Herman, "Battlefield Taunt," 125, 125, 128, 129, 131.

27 "Sir Perceval of Galles," lines 2073–76, 2083–2084.

["I understand  
You might with a smaller stick  
Have benefited your hand better  
And have done yourself some good.  
Of your foot you get no good;  
But hop if you can."]

After Perceval decapitates the giant, the narrator joins in the taunting, saying with understated sarcasm, "He was ane unhende knave / A geantberde so to schafe, / For sothe, als I say!"<sup>28</sup> [He was a discourteous knave to shave a giant's beard so, in truth, as I say.] The narrator and, by extension, the audience join in the giant's defeat, making the victory a communal act, and thus emphasizing the fair unknown's acceptance by the community.

The Middle English romance *Sir Tryamour* similarly provides a fairly typical example of snark and laughter signaling victory and community. At the end of the battle against the giant Grander, Sir Tryamour chops off the giant's legs at the knees, saying, "'A lytull lower, syr ... / And let us small go wyth thee; / Now are we bothe at oon assyse.'"<sup>29</sup> ["A little lower, sir, and let us make you become small; now we are both the same size!"] The lady, who has observed the battle and been saved from the giant suitor, responds with laughter, "A lowde laghtur that lady logh,"<sup>30</sup> [that lady laughed a loud laughter,] which indicates that the writer wants the audience to recognize the hero's wit and the dark humor that erupts when the giant continues fighting:

Burlonde on hys stompus stode,  
Wyte hym not yf he were wode,  
Then faght he wondur faste!<sup>31</sup>  
  
[Burlond stood on his stumps,  
Do not blame him if he were furious,  
Then he fought amazingly zealously.]

In *The Sultan of Babylon*, the lady Floripas similarly laughs when ten of Charlemagne's knights overcome the odds and defeat three hundred knights: "He

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<sup>28</sup> "Sir Perceval of Galles," lines 2094–2096.

<sup>29</sup> "Sir Tryamour," in *Four Middle English Romances*, 2nd ed., ed. Harriet Hudson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2006), lines 1555–1557.

<sup>30</sup> "Sir Tryamour," line 1558.

<sup>31</sup> "Sir Tryamour," lines 1561–63.

spared nether lewde ner clerke, / And Floripas thereof loughē.”<sup>32</sup> [He spared neither layman nor clerk, and Floripas laughed at that.] Though boasts and the lady observing the action are part of the conventions for single-combat, laughter transforms the scene from just another formulaic battle into the hero’s rite of passage into community now that he possesses not only prowess and chivalry but also the verbal skills suggested by his wit. Witty remarks assert the power of the victor—the power predicated upon not only physical prowess but also verbal wit. Controlled, humorous snark also suggests that the hero has come of age, and laughter marks that maturation. In romances such as *Octavian* and *Sir Perceval*, in which the noble of rustic upbringing proves himself a worthy knight, humorous moments mark both their youth and their maturation. This growth is developed and similarly marked throughout the separation-reunion romances and stories of the fair unknown.

The Charlemagne romances also use snark to delineate class distinctions, to suggest a character’s worth, and to indicate how much restraint he or she has achieved. In *The Sultan of Babylon*, when Oliver challenges the Saracen Sir Ferumbras, Ferumbras “lough,” much as the court in *Octavian* laughs at Florent entering in his rusty armor:

“If thou be curteys knyghte and lele,  
Rise up and let us fight togeder.”  
Ferumbras sate stille and lough;  
Him liste not to rise oute of the place.<sup>33</sup>

[“If you are a courteous and brave knight,  
Rise up and let us fight together.”  
Ferumbras sat still and laughed;  
He did not desire to rise out of the place.]

They laugh or smile because they do not think this knight is worthy, whether it be because of his rusty armor, his youth, or his social class, or simply because he is unknown. Not recognizing Oliver, and believing only Charlemagne’s twelve peers are worthy adversaries, Ferumbras boasts that Charlemagne was “but a foole” for sending this other knight.<sup>34</sup> Rather than reveal his identity, Oliver challenges him, remaining disguised behind youthful snark while also presenting a strong argument for Ferumbras to take up his sword against him:

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32 “The Sultan of Babylon,” in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), lines 2601–2602.

33 “The Sultan of Babylon,” lines 1129–1132.

34 “The Sultan of Babylon,” line 1139.



“Howe longe,” quod Olyvere, “wiltowe plete?  
Take thyn armes and come to me,  
And prove that thou saiest in dede,  
For boost thou blowest, as thenketh me.”  
Whan Ferumbras herde him speke so wel,  
He caught his helme in grete ire<sup>35</sup>

[“How long,” said Oliver, “will you prattle?  
Take up your arms and come towards me,  
And prove what you say in deed,  
For you blow boasts, as it seems to me.”  
When Ferumbras heard him speak so well,  
He picked up his helmet with great ire]

Oliver tells Ferumbras that he must earn his boast in combat. Through this verbal sparring match, Oliver proves himself worthy of fighting to Ferumbras. The physical and the verbal skills go together; both are necessary qualities in a worthy knight, and Ferumbras, who despite being a Saracen is in many ways the most chivalric knight in the story,<sup>36</sup> recognizes this fact. Through his condescending laughter or smiling, meanwhile, Ferumbras exhibits the unrestrained overconfidence that will be his undoing, since Oliver defeats him.

The unrestrained snark of the sultan in *The Sege of Melayne* similarly characterizes him as unworthy of victory against Charlemagne’s peers. When four of Charlemagne’s peers are taken prisoner, he demands that they convert, but Rowlande politely responds that they all must believe in the one who died for us on the cross. The sultan responds without restraint by mocking Christian belief:

Thane loughes the Sowdane with eghne full smale  
And saide, “Ane hundrethe of youre goddis alle hale  
Have I garte byrne in firre with bale  
Sen firste I wanne this wone.  
I sawe at none no more powstee  
Than att another rotyn tree  
One erthe, so mote I gone.”<sup>37</sup>

[Then the sultan laughed with very small eyes  
And said, “A hundred of your gods all whole  
I have had burned in the fire with harm  
Since I first won this dwelling.

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35 “The Sultan of Babylon,” lines 1151–56.

36 Debra E. Best, “Monstrous Alterity and Christian Conversion in the Middle English *The Sowdone of Babylone*,” *Medieval Perspectives* 19 (2004): 42–63.

37 “The Sege of Melayne” in *Three Middle English Charlemagne Romances*, ed. Alan Lupack (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 1990), lines 415–420.

I saw from none of them any more power  
 Than one sees from any other rotten tree  
 On earth, as I might go.”]

He then commands a cross to be brought in order to see if it can be burned. The sultan asks,

“How solde he than helpe another man  
 That for hymselfe no gyn ne kan,  
 Nother crafte ne gyn?”<sup>38</sup>

[“How can it help another man  
 when for itself it knows no trick at all,  
 nor skill nor contrivance (to save itself from the fire)?”]

Not only does the cross not burn, since the fire keeps going out, but when the cross crashes, fire leaps from it into Saracen eyes. They cannot see, just as they cannot see the true religion, and they are ironically burned in the fire that was intended for the cross. Rowlande notes the miracle. God has the last word. Unrestrained snark comes from one who underestimates his opponent or who does not see the power of the fair unknown. In this scene, Christ himself becomes a fair unknown, one whose power and status is not initially recognized, and He proves He is worthy of his Christian followers. The entire scene also speaks to the fundamental problem with conveying Christ’s heroism in a heroic way. How does one do so when His most heroic moment is a passive act? Through the symbolism of the cross, that act here becomes active. The real heroism, though, is the faith of Rowlande and the other Christian prisoners, who remain steadfast in their beliefs, even as they are told to convert.

As a long romance that begins with the protagonist’s birth and ends with his death, detailing his maturation as he seeks to reclaim his lands and title, *Bevis of Hampton* demonstrates how the hero’s snark marks his progress towards worthiness. In addition, snark is an integral part of his courtship with the heroine, Josian, whose progress towards worthiness is similarly marked by alterations in her verbal skills. From the outset, the tale asserts the importance of restraint. After Bevis’s mother arranges his father’s murder and marries the Emperor of Germany, Bevis’s teacher, Saber, tells Bevis that he will send him into another land to learn ““of corteisie”” until he is ““of age”” and can return to win his

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38 “The Sege of Melayne,” lines 442–444.

lands and heritage;<sup>39</sup> Saber outlines the conventional romance plot. Bevis almost foils this plan before even hearing Saber's instructions. He verbally attacks his mother as a "vile houre"<sup>40</sup> [a "vile whore"], while promising vengeance for his father's murder in a short-tempered round of snark that leads his mother to plot his murder. Then Bevis disregards Saber's measured advice and instead goes to court and knocks down the Emperor, assaulting him both verbally and physically in an attack that cannot possibly be successful because the court is full of the Emperor's men. This lack of restraint shows that this child clearly is not ready to rule.

He is, however, able to wield a certain amount of verbal prowess against the porter who attempts to deny his entry to court, showing that, although Bevis has not yet proven himself worthy of regaining his lands, he can defeat those of inferior social rank. When the porter calls him a "scherewe houre sone,"<sup>41</sup> ["a wicked whore's son,"] Bevis responds, "'An houre sone for soth ich wes, / Wel ich it wot!"<sup>42</sup> ["In truth I was a whore's son. Well I know it!"] His verbal superiority proven by this snarky and humorous comeback, he decapitates the porter, and the narrator shares in the verbal victory through his understated narration: "His heved he gan al to cleve / And forth a wente with that leve / In to the halle."<sup>43</sup> [He cleaved his head completely, and with that leave, he went forth into the hall.] Here the wordplay occurs in the word "leve," or the permission that the porter denies but Bevis takes by force by taking the porter's head. The head itself is symbolic, since out of the porter's head came the words that denied Bevis entrance. As a display of one's identity, the head's removal indicates the removal of the porter's misplaced assumption of a rank higher than Bevis's. Even at this early age, Bevis can defeat the porter, foreshadowing the mature Bevis's abilities and indicating an innate class status that cannot be taken from him. When he finally proves himself worthy by means of his verbal skills, he will be physically ready to regain his kingdom, even though he possesses the physical skills before he has the restraint required to use them wisely.

This discrepancy between physical skills and mental maturity is further demonstrated later in the text when King Ermin sends Bevis, now a proven knight, to Brademond with a letter that secretly commands Bevis's death. The over-trusting Bevis does not heed warnings to read the letter. Upon his arrival,

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39 "Bevis of Hampton," in *Four Romances of English*, ed. Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1999), lines 362–372.

40 "Bevis of Hampton," line 302.

41 "Bevis of Hampton," line 398.

42 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 410–411.

43 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 418–420.

he signals his overconfidence by defiling the Saracen temple and then sarcastically saying to Brademond,

“Mahoun, that is god thin,  
Tervagaunt and Apolin,  
Thee blessi and dighte  
Be alle here mighte!”<sup>44</sup>

[“May Mohammed, who is your god,  
Tervagaunt and Apolin,  
bless and save you  
with all their might!”]

Bevis overreaches when he defiles the temple, and he displays too much pride, even as he believes himself to be working for God. The juxtaposition between his sarcastic injunction to the pagan gods whom he has just defiled, and the condemning letter, which the next lines mention, emphasizes through dramatic irony that Bevis has not yet proven his worth. He may be valiant and victorious in battle, but he is too trusting, confident, and proud, and he lacks all restraint and diplomacy when he enters the court of his enemies. He must learn humility, and he does so in Brademond’s dungeon, where he spends seven years, fasting and beset by adders or dragons, depending upon the version.

When Bevis emerges from the dungeon, his command of language has changed. Though he is still rash and snarky with the lady Josian, his comments in single-combat now reveal restraint and a certain wittiness, as shown when he fights the giant brother of Grander, whom Bevis kills following his escape. In the conventional boast before battle, he jokes about Grander’s defeat, saying, “Wel I wot, ich made him prest.”<sup>45</sup> [“Well I know, I made him a priest.”] Herzman, Drake, and Salisbury note that this description of the decapitation is “a grim and ironic joke about the tonsure, the ‘close shave’ that identified medieval clerics.”<sup>46</sup> When the giant subsequently kills the horse Bevis is riding, an unchivalric act, Bevis’s response is controlled, even as he declares his anger:

“Be god, I swere thee an oth:  
Thow schelt nought, whan we tegoth,

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<sup>44</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 1379–1382.

<sup>45</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” line 1872.

<sup>46</sup> Ronald B. Herzman, Graham Drake, and Eve Salisbury, eds., *Four Romances of England* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 1999), page 331.

Laughande me wende fram,  
Now thow havest mad me gram!"<sup>47</sup>

["By god, I swear an oath to you:  
you shall not at all, when we go forth,  
go away from me laughing,  
now that you have made me angry!"]

The word "laughande" is notable. Bevis demonstrates restraint when he notes that even though he has been made angry, he will not be the one laughed at for an unrestrained response. Rather, the audience will laugh with him, when he enjoys his victory and makes snarky comments that are humorous rather than brash, such as his comments about Grander and his recognition here that only the victor gets to laugh. As Bevis matures, his snark is transformed so that it now provides laughter and suggests verbal skill. But before he can wield snark, chivalry, and prowess in the reclaiming of his lands, he first must prove himself worthy of the feisty Josian, and she to him.

Josian follows a similar progression. Though she proves herself verbally gifted when she convinces her father not to kill Bevis, she exhibits a lack of restraint—both physical and verbal—when she futilely propositions Bevis. She tells him to "with me do thee wille,"<sup>48</sup> [do your will with me,] and when he rejects her, her words exhibit unrestrained, irritable snarkiness:

"And thow, cherl, me havest forsake;  
Mahoun thee yeve tene and wrake!  
Beter become the iliche,  
For to fowen an olde dicke,  
Thanne for to be dobbed knight,  
Te gon among maidenenes bright.  
To other contre thow might fare:  
Mahoun thee yeve tene and care!"<sup>49</sup>

["And you, churl, have forsaken me;  
May Mohammed give you suffering and injury!  
It is more becoming for the likes of you  
To clean an old ditch  
Than to be dubbed knight,  
To go among fair maidens.  
May you go to another country:  
May Mohammed give you suffering and injury!"]

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47 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 1895–1898.

48 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 1097, 1109.

49 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 1117–1124.

Bevis then reveals his proper rank to her, noting that he must regain his lands before he will be worthy of marrying her. He departs, and she immediately regrets her words—her lack of restraint. She then promises him that she will become Christian if he will forgive her, but she again shows a lack of judgment by approaching him in his bedroom, leading to the report that Bevis has deflowered her, which results in his imprisonment. Nevertheless, she comes to speak with him, not to throw herself at him. She has quickly regained her verbal abilities, and she keeps them.

Typically, the knight wins the lady in a tournament or by rescuing her or, as is the case with Bevis and Josian, when she sees his skill in battle. The lady proves her worth by preserving her virginity, which Josian does three times. Nevertheless, Bevis and Josian also prove themselves worthy of one another through their snarky interactions, especially when they escape together to a cave and are threatened by lions. Throughout this scene, Josian controls her snark, while the still maturing Bevis behaves brashly. Josian complains that she is hungry, and Bevis responds disdainfully: “How darst thou of me meete crave? / Wel thou wotest, that noon I have.”<sup>50</sup> [“How dare you ask me for food? You well know that I have none.”] Josian then sarcastically states that she has heard of this thing called hunting, which men do:

“I have herde of savagenes,  
Whenne yonge men were in wyldernes,  
That they toke hert and hinde  
And other bestes, that they myght fynde;  
They slowen hem and soden hem in her hide;  
Thus doon men that in wode abyde.”<sup>51</sup>

[“I have heard of savageness,  
When young men were in the wilderness,  
That they took stag and doe  
And other beasts that they might find;  
They slew them and prepared them in their hide;  
Men who dwell in the woods do thus.”]

We do not hear Bevis’s verbal response; the next line says that he goes into the forest to shoot beasts. When Bevis gets nastily snarky with Josian, she effectively responds with sarcasm. This is the woman that Bevis needs.

In the ensuing battle with the two lions who enter the cave, Bevis almost dies because he still lacks restraint. The lions will not harm Josian because

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50 “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 2359–2360.

51 “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 2363–2368.

she is a "kinges daughter, quene and maide both,"<sup>52</sup> so she offers to hold one, but Bevis will not let her:

"I myght yelp of lytel prys,  
There I had a lyon quelde,  
The while a woman another helde!  
Thow shalt never umbraide me,  
When thou comest hoom to my contre:  
But thou let hem goo both twoo  
Have good day, fro thee I goo!"<sup>53</sup>

["I might boast of little worth,  
Where I had killed a lion,  
While a woman held another!  
You shall never reproach me,  
When you come home to my country:  
Unless you let them go, both of them,  
Have a good day, I will go from you!"]

He desires the great victory, but he is also aware of Josian's verbal power, which he does not want to be subject to. Josian remains silent; he wins this sparring match. Nevertheless, she regains her verbal power immediately afterwards when she persuades Bevis to keep the giant Ascopard alive and make him their page. This relationship thus develops through the couple's verbal sparring, snarkiness, and sarcasm.

Finally, Bevis is ready to regain his lands from the Emperor of Germany, who killed his father and married his mother, and he does so by exercising his verbal skills and trickery, showing his intelligence before he fights on the battlefield. He tricks the Emperor into arming Bevis's troops and then sends a messenger to tell him. The Emperor grows so angry that he throws a knife at the messenger but misses, killing his own son. Now it is the Emperor who lacks restraint, and Bevis drives him to that point through his own measured plans and words. The messenger himself attacks his social superior by snarkily commenting on what has just happened:

"Thow gropedest the wif anight to lowe,  
Thow might nought sen aright to throwe;  
Thow havest so swonke on hire to night,  
Thow havest negh forlore the sight:

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52 "Bevis of Hampton," line 2393.

53 "Bevis of Hampton," lines 2414–2420.

Her thow havest lither haunsel,  
A worse thee betide schel!"<sup>54</sup>

["You groped your wife too lowly at night,  
You might not at all see straight to throw;  
You have so worked on her at night,  
That you have nearly lost your sight:  
In her you have a bad omen,  
Worse things shall happen to you!"]

He attributes the miss to the Emperor going blind from sex with his wife, highlighting the adulterous relationship with Bevis's mother. The messenger returns, tells Bevis what happened, and Bevis "lough and hadde gode game,"<sup>55</sup> [laughed and had a good joke.] Bevis has the final laugh. The messenger, as Bevis's proxy, wields the capping insult against the Emperor with words that are snarky but also pointed and controlled, delivering a direct message against the Emperor's initial actions.

The romance is not just about Bevis, though. Otherwise, it could end quickly after the Emperor's defeat and the regaining of Bevis's lands. Instead, the story turns back to Josian, who must prove herself worthy by once again protecting her virginity. And she does so in the ways that we typically see the hero prove his worth—through violent action and a witty commentary on her victory, even as she is then immediately turned into a damsel who requires rescuing. While Bevis is off reclaiming his lands, another suitor to Josian, Miles, lures her protector, Ascopard, away, kidnaps her, and forces her into marriage. Josian thinks quickly to preserve her virginity, makes a noose, and hangs him on the bed: "Be the nekke she hath him up tight / And let him so ride al the night."<sup>56</sup> [She has him up tight by the neck and let him so ride all the night.] With the use of double-entendre, the narrator is himself snarkily commenting on the appropriateness of the would-be rapist's murder. In the morning, one of Miles's men tries to awaken him, saying,

"Awake ... Sire Erl Mile,  
Thow havest sleped so longe while,  
Thin heved oweth to ake wel."<sup>57</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," lines 3105–3110.

<sup>55</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," line 3116.

<sup>56</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," lines 3223–24.

<sup>57</sup> "Bevis of Hampton," lines 3245–3246.



[“Awake, Sir Earl Miles,  
you have slept for such a long while  
that your head ought to ache well.”]

Josian responds by proclaiming what she has done:

“Never eft ne schel his heved ake!  
Ichave so tyled him for that sore,  
Schel hit never eft ake more,  
Yerstendai he me wedded with wrong  
And tonight ichave him honge.”<sup>58</sup>

[“Never ever again shall his head ache!  
I have so handled him for that pain,  
It shall never again ache any more,  
Yesterday he wedded me with wrong  
And tonight I have hung him.”]

By repeating the baron’s words about the aching head, Josian uses the same sort of snarky word play that the narrator has just used about the hanging and that heroes use when boasting of their victories over giants and other foes. Even as she knows that her actions will condemn her to death, she commands the language and proclaims the justice of her actions, revealing the restraint with which she has preserved her virginity. Her bravery, feminine prowess, and loyalty to Bevis thus shown, she is ready to be rescued by Ascopard and Bevis. Just two lines later, she and Bevis marry.<sup>59</sup> Bevis and Josian have proven their worth to one another. Their early verbal sparring revealed that they were meant for one another. They have both proven their worth in physical combat: Bevis in reclaiming his lands and rescuing the damsel, and Josian in preserving her virginity. Their snark, moreover, has transformed from a sign of irksomeness and a lack of restraint into the witty comments of a victorious hero and heroine.

At this point, one might expect the story to end, but it does not, instead continuing for another thousand lines, largely concerned with tying up loose ends. Ascopard, as giants do, betrays them to Josian’s first suitor, Yvor, and is finally killed. Josian preserves her virginity for a third time. Bevis has his final showdown with Yvor. The couple reconciles with Josian’s father, King Ermin. Marriages are arranged for the minor characters who have helped Bevis along the way. Bevis and Josian have two children.

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58 “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 3250 – 3254.

59 “Bevis of Hampton,” line 3477.

In the final battle of London, Bevis turns towards the Christianity that he overzealously protected early in the story when he did not seem to understand it, and snark and sarcasm are conspicuously absent. When Bevis kills the steward who betrayed London, he says,

“Treitour! now is the lif itint.  
Thus men schel teche file glotouns,  
That wile misaie gode barouns!”<sup>60</sup>

[“Traitor! Now your life is lost.  
Thus men shall teach vile gluttons  
who will slander good barons!”]

These words are measured and not humorous or ironic. When the Londoners attack Bevis, he responds not with snark but with reference to Christianity:

“...I yelde me  
To God, þat sit in Trinite!  
To non other man I nel me yelde,  
While that ich mai me wepne welde!”<sup>61</sup>

[“I yield myself  
to God who sits in Trinity!  
I will not yield myself to any other man  
so long as I may myself wield a weapon!”]

Bevis now sounds much more like his father, Guy, when he was attacked at the story’s beginning:

“Me thenketh, thow seist ayen the lawe,  
So God me amende!  
Me wif and child, that was so fre,  
Yif thow thenkest beneme hem me,  
Ich schel hem defende!”<sup>62</sup>

[“It seems to me that you speak against the law,  
So may God amend me!  
My wife and child, who was so noble,  
If you think to take them from me,  
I shall defend them!”]

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<sup>60</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 4386–4388.

<sup>61</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 4429–4432.

<sup>62</sup> “Bevis of Hampton,” lines 224–228.

Guy responds to the Emperor's threat to his family by thinking first of them and of God. Rulers, it seems, are beyond snark and instead issue measured statements. Bevis in this way aligns himself with the best of all knights, Gawain, whose chivalry in the Middle English *Sir Perceval* contrasts the brash snarkiness of Sir Kay.

Medieval romance largely concerns itself with the hero proving himself worthy of marriage, of his lands, and of ruling. Traditionally, he does so by learning the rules of chivalry and showing his prowess in battle. As he gains chivalry, he learns restraint and grows from brash youth to knight to king. In *Bevis of Hampton*, this growth involves more than learning a code of behavior and how to fight; the hero also increases his verbal skills. He begins as a brash child, whose actions and words show no restraint, instead exhibiting irritable and short-tempered snarkiness. While imprisoned, though, he learns a certain humility, and he emerges with a new kind of verbal skill; bitter, unrestrained snark transforms into a controlled wit, exemplified by the capping insult in battle and a sense of humor shared with and by the audience. The chivalric knight laughs instead of being laughed at. A ruler, though, must exercise a certain seriousness, so after Bevis regains his lands, even the humorous wit disappears, revealing a man capable of judging and appropriately honoring God and Christendom.

To a certain extent, all the heroes in the Middle English romances position themselves at some point in this progression from harsh snark to wit to seriousness. Perceval, Florent, and Tryamour, for example, begin as brash youths but become proven knights. Sir Eglamour seems worthy from the beginning, even as he must prove himself through quests and battles, but his son Degrebell, another fair unknown, represents the snarky teenager of the tale. Kay and Gawain represent the two extremes in the verbal code: snark versus courtesy. When young knights gain verbal control, marked by a language that joins the cutting remarks with humor, they also are ready to prove their worth in battle, gain or regain their lands, and win the lady. Laughter and sarcasm establish relationships: hero and villain, husband and wife, father and son. Ultimately, this verbal control marks the worthy knight who has the restraint of chivalry—and of Christendom—on his side.

In *Bevis of Hampton*, the heroine, Josian, also participates in this process of growth. She proves her worth as women in romance traditionally do, by protecting her virginity: through magic, violence, and knowledge. Like other Saracen women such as Floripas in *The Sultan of Babylon*, she exhibits verbal agency from the beginning, convincing her father to spare Bevis and Bevis to spare Ascopard. At the end, she transforms into the stereotypical silenced married Christian woman. Like Bevis, though, Josian's maturation and worth are also marked by her command of snark. Early on its harshness shows that she is a match for

Bevis, participating in a tradition that appears in Shakespearean comedy and in modern day romantic comedies. Later she victoriously makes witty remarks about her violent defeat of her enemy. In these stories, then, snark and the development of verbal skills that it shows are just as important as prowess, chivalry, and virginity in proving one's worth. The complete hero and heroine prove themselves physically, follow a code of behavior, exercise restraint, and are verbally adept.

The hero's snarkiness does more than simply show his wit, however, particularly when placed alongside narrative interjections and other moments of laughter and smiling. When the audience, both inside and outside the text, laughs, it shares in the hero's victory. The hero's victory thus becomes a victory for the community, which shares in the hero's superior intelligence. The writer himself, moreover, displays his own self-conscious literary intellect, as he plays with the conventions of medieval romance and moves beyond and at times parodies the genre's formulaic nature. He proves to be the real victor. When the boasts become signals of the character's status in the progress towards maturity and chivalry, the physical battles become overshadowed by word play. Through laughter and sarcasm, the texts thus assert the power of language to overcome the greatest threats. The giants and other villains and all the threats they represent are cut down and ultimately defeated by the power of the writer and of the audience who joins him in laughter.

Brian S. Lee

## ***“Hostilis Inrisio”***

### Some Instances of “derision with a certain severity” in Medieval English Literature

Can words tear flesh? People in the Middle Ages, like some of their more recent descendants, may on occasion have done their best to find a form of words that might, but such has been the variety of their attempts to puncture self-esteem that it is not easy to decide which deserve inclusion in any definition we may find acceptable when we call a gibe sarcastic. Accordingly, the sophisticated verbal assault that must confine itself to a metaphoric tearing of the flesh in order to establish or confirm a position of superiority is not readily observable in the literature of the English Middle Ages, though, as this essay will seek to demonstrate, it is by no means impossible to discover. What forms may be found, how destructive could they be, and whence were they learnt?

John Peter rather too sweepingly concluded that there is, strictly speaking, no genuine medieval satire, but only complaint.<sup>1</sup> Even less, it would seem, is there “genuine” sarcasm, only flyting, invective, and apparent ironies that may in their time and context have been intended merely as factual statements. The rhetorical treatises that the Middle Ages inherited or derived from classical models occasionally mentioned but hardly discussed the trope that later ages would refer to as sarcasm. English writers were consequently less likely to embellish their fictions with examples of it; perhaps it was not readily categorized in everyday life, though it is hard to believe it was seldom in some form experienced.

Unsurprisingly, therefore, the word “sarcasm” (etymologically “flesh-tearing”)<sup>2</sup> does not seem to have been used in English before the later sixteenth century: *OED*’s earliest instance is from E.K.’s gloss (1579) to the October Eclogue in Spenser’s *The Shepheardes Calender*. Lamenting the decline of poetry since the time of the great Roman poets, the shepherd Cuddie observes that nowadays either ribald rhymes commend men’s follies, or poetry is despised entirely, for “Tom Piper makes vs better melodie” (line 78). E.K. glosses the example of

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<sup>1</sup> John Peter, *Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature* (Oxford: The Clarendon Press, 1956), 1103.

<sup>2</sup> The Greek word means “flesh-tearing,” and is mentioned without definition among the allegorical tropes dealt with by Quintilian, *Institutio oratoria* (c. A.D. 95), 8.6.57.

Tom Piper as “An Ironicall Sarcasmus,” since it lampoons those who foolishly prefer as “better melodie” verse that is actually inferior.<sup>3</sup>

“When we deride with a certaine seueritie, we may call it the bitter taunt [Sarcasmus]” writes Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589), before quoting three scornful witticisms as examples.<sup>4</sup>

**Sarcasmus.**  
or the  
Bitter taunt .

Or when we deride with a certaine seueritie, we may call it the bitter taunt [*Sarcasmus*] as *Charles* the fift Emperour aunswered the Duke of Arskot, beseeching him recompence of seruice done at the siege of Renty, against *Henry* the French king, where the Duke was taken prisoner, and afterward escaped clad like a Colliar. Thou wert taken, quoth the Emperour, like a coward, and escapedst like a Colliar, wherefore get thee home and liue vpon thine owne. Or as king *Henry* the eight said to one of his priuy chamber, who sued for Sir *Anthony Rowse*, a knight of Norfolk. that his Maiestie would be good vnto him, for that he was an ill begger. Quoth the king againe, if he be ashamed to beg, we are ashamed to geue. Or as *Charles* the fift Emperour, hauing taken in battaile *John Frederike* Duke of Saxon, with the Lantgraue of Hessen and others: this Duke being a man of monstrous bignesse and corpulence, after the Emperour had seene the prisoners, said to those that were about him, I haue gone a hunting many times, yet neuer tooke I such a swine before.

Figure 1: *Arte of English Poesie*, Scolar Press facsimile, Sig. Y<sup>v</sup>.

Puttenham does not say that sarcasm requires wit, involving irony or metaphor, as E.K. seems to assume, though these would hardly be lacking in Renaissance, or medieval, examples. Nor does he mention the anger or contempt, or downright malice, much harder to evaluate, that usually prompts a scornful or searing comment. Puttenham's definition, from whatever source he derived it, parallels that of the seventh-century “*doctor egregius*” Isidore, Archbishop of

3 *The Poetical Works of Edmund Spenser*, ed. J.C. Smith and E. de Selincourt (London: Oxford University Press, 1912, 1950), 456–59. “An Ironicall Sarcasmus, spoken in derision of these rude wits, whych make more account of a ryming rybaud, then of skill grounded vpon learning and iudgment.” The initials E.K. may stand for Edward Kirke, Spenser's fellow student at Cambridge, but his identity remains uncertain.

4 George Puttenham, *The Arte of English Poesie* (1589; Scolar Press facsimile, 1968), “158” (Sig. Y, verso).

Seville: "Sarcasmos est hostilis inrisio cum amaritudine."<sup>5</sup> Isidore, but not Puttenham, offers the example of Pyrrhus's sarcastic gibe as he kills Priam, from Virgil's *Aeneid*, a poem known, of course, to educated readers in the Middle Ages.<sup>6</sup> Too feeble to pierce the cruel Pyrrhus with an effective spear cast, the old king Priam angers him by saying he can hardly be Achilles's son since he lacks the compassion Achilles showed in returning Hector's body to his grieving father. "Well then," Pyrrhus sarcastically replies, "take that message to my father the son of Peleus: remember to tell him how degenerate his savage son, Neoptolemus, was. Now die!"<sup>7</sup> Pyrrhus's pretence to agree with Priam's censure of him is a sarcasm that perceptive medieval readers of Virgil may not have missed, whether alerted to it by Isidore (or the commentator Servius) or not.

One may compare the sort of boasting that commonly takes place, in literature at least, before a champion engages in battle. It is certainly a taunt, and may often include sarcasm. The *locus classicus*, as far as the Middle Ages were concerned, might well be the exchange of pleasantries between David and Goliath (I Samuel 17), each threatening to give the other's carcass to the scavengers of the field, although Goliath's scornful "numquid ego canis sum quod tu venis ad me cum baculo?" ["Am I a dog, that thou comest to me with staves?" (KJV)] proved a wasted sarcasm, for he didn't bargain on the five stones, only one of which was necessary!

A twelfth-century example of a warrior's sarcastic taunt may be found in Geoffrey of Monmouth's Latin *History of the Kings of Britain* (1147). Prior to the Trojan landing at Totnes, the mighty Corineus single-handedly routs an army of Poitevins; not content with belaboring them, he berates them as follows:

Corineus brandished his battle-axe among the retreating battalions and added not a little to their terror by shouting: 'Where are you making for, you cowards? Where are you running to, you slackers? Turn back! Turn back, I say, and do battle with Corineus! Shame on you!

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5 "Sarcasm is hostile mockery with bitter forcefulness." Isidore, *Etymologiae*, I, xxvii, 29, ed. W.M. Lindsay (Oxford, 1911).

6 Chaucer refers to the incident in a burlesque context in the *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *The Canterbury Tales*, VII, 3357–59. He does not give Pyrrhus's sarcastic speech, but intensifies his hostile affront by having him seize Priam by the beard; Virgil says "Implicuitque comam laeva," "and twisted his hair in his left hand" before stabbing him with the sword in his right.

7 Cui Pyrrhus: 'Referes ergo haec, et nuntius ibis  
Pelidae genitori: illi mea tristia facta,  
Degeneremque Neoptoleum, narrare memento.  
Nunc morere.' (*Aeneid* 2, 547–50)

The 4th cent. grammarian and commentator Maurus Servius Honoratus, in his commentary on the *Aeneid*, says of line 547, "sarcasmos est, iocus cum amaritudine," and uses the phrase "hostilis inrisio" of *Aeneid* 10, 557.

You are so many thousands and yet you run away from me who am one! Take at least this comfort in your flight: that it is I, Corineus, who am after you—I who often drive in confusion before me the giants of Etruria, thrusting them down to hell three or four at a time.”<sup>8</sup>

The parallel passage in Lazamon’s *Brut*, a late twelfth-century alliterative Englishing of Wace’s Norman-French adaptation of Geoffrey’s chronicle, replaces the idea that the discomfited host should feel it an honor to be beaten by so great a warrior with another, though weaker, gibe: Corineus shouts after the fleeing king Goffar and his men

“Goffar mid þire ferde; wi wolt þu fleam makian.  
Ne miht þu na-wiht so fleon; 3if þu us wlt heonne fleman.  
þu most swiþer fehten; er we heonne iwenden.”

[“Goffar, you and your army, why are you taking to flight? You mustn’t flee like this if you want to chase us out of here. You’ll need to fight harder before we leave here.”]<sup>9</sup>

The irony Lazamon reports is gleeful rather than bitter: there is no need for hostile anger when victory is so patently obvious.

For Isidore, and likewise for Puttenham, though in a different order, *sarcasmus* is one of seven subsections of *allegoria*, all ways of saying one thing and implying another. Both authors are indebted, either directly or at some remove, to the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* (c. 86–82 B.C.), believed in the Middle Ages to be by Cicero, as available manuscripts erroneously alleged. The author of this treatise, borrowing Greek ideas and profusely illustrating them with Latin examples, classifies features of style that may be used to embellish oratory. He defines allegory (*permutatio*) as “a manner of speech denoting one thing by the letter of the words, but another by their meaning.” [*Permutatio est oratio aliud verbis aliud sententia demonstrans.*] Its three aspects are comparison, argument and contrast. The examples the author gives under “contrast” would certainly qualify as sarcastic if aimed in deictic mode at a specific individual or target. Thus, there is contrast “if, for example, one should mockingly call a spendthrift and voluptuary frugal and thrifty” [*si quis hominem prodigum et luxuriosum inludens parcum et diligentem appellet.*] The operative word, for our purposes, is “mockingly” [*inludens*]. Pointing out that both comparison and contrast may through

<sup>8</sup> Geoffrey of Monmouth, *The History of the Kings of Britain* I.12, trans. Lewis Thorpe (Penguin, 1966), 68.

<sup>9</sup> Lazamon, *Brut*, 790–2, ed. G.L. Brook and R.F. Leslie, *EETS* 250 (Oxford, 1963), 40 (my translation). Wace died about 1175, and Lazamon seems likely to have translated Wace during the reign of Richard I (1189–99). Lazamon probably did not know Geoffrey’s *History*, but there is evidence that he may have had access to one or more of Geoffrey’s lost Welsh sources.



metaphor make use of argument, the author adds as an example "if we should call some undutiful man who has beaten his father Aeneas, or an intemperate or adulterous man Hippolytus" [si quem impium qui patrem verberarit Aeneam vocemus, intemperantem et adulterum Hippolytum nominemus.]<sup>10</sup> Aeneas of course was noted for his filial piety, and Hippolytus for honorable chastity. The personal allusions make the irony patent.

Even though such popular grammatical and rhetorical treatises as the *Rhetorica ad Herennium* and Geoffrey of Vinsauf's *Poetria Nova*<sup>11</sup> do not include *sarcasmus* among their lists of tropes, one need not be surprised, after these examples, by instances in medieval literature of such cutting ironies as would nowadays be called sarcastic. Sarcasm, after all, is the somewhat complex expression of an attitude of mind, revealing itself in tone, innuendo and metaphor, not simply one of the "colors" of rhetoric Geoffrey of Vinsauf lists and exemplifies.<sup>12</sup> In the interests of close categorisation rhetoricians tend to separate tropes that in practice overlap, but it remains true that sarcasm can hardly be called such without some trace of irony: derision implies judgement, not simply an outburst of bitterness.

A vituperative outburst, in the often vain hope of frightening, may be only a release of emotion signifying impotence, whereas sarcasm attempts to influence behavior by shaming; it stems from a position of superiority. It is, in other words, an exercise of power, or attempt to seize power, expressed verbally. The otherwise helpless abuser may invoke divine aid, but a sarcastic gibe generally implies that the speaker is in any case confident that he or she has the upper hand. Examples of furious abuse, sarcastic scorning, and impotent invective

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10 [Cicero] *Ad Herennium* IV, xxxiv, 46, ed. and trans. Harry Caplan (London, Loeb, 1964), 344–6. Cf. *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto, 1967), 49: "Or I may transpose a proper noun for another reason: that the likeness suggested may be not a true one, but by contrast a kind of ridicule, as when I call a man deformed in body a *Paris*, or one cruel in heart an *Aeneas*, one of slight strength a *Pyrrhus*, one rude in speech a *Cicero*, or one who is wanton *Hippolytus*."

11 For a history of how originally discrete treatments of grammar and rhetoric gradually came to meld in the Middle Ages, and were later adapted to textual rather than oral composition, with analyses of the medieval *artes poetriae* of Matthew of Vendome, Geoffrey of Vinsauf, John of Garland and Eberhard, see William M. Purcell, *Ars Poetriae: Rhetorical and Grammatical Invention at the Margin of Literacy* (Columbia, 1996). See also James J. Murphy, *Rhetoric in the Middle Ages: A History of the Rhetorical Theory from Saint Augustine to the Renaissance*, MRTS 227 (Tempe, Arizona, 2001). John of Garland's "Parisiana Poetria" is edited and translated by Traugott Lawler (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1974).

12 *Poetria Nova of Geoffrey of Vinsauf*, trans. Margaret F. Nims (Toronto, 1967), 56–72. Chaucer's Franklin modestly, and ironically, as it turns out, claims that the only "colors" he knows are not of rhetoric but such as grow in the meadow (*The Canterbury Tales*, V, 723–26.)

abound in the Mystery play *Magnus Herodes*, by the so-called Wakefield Master, where the horror of the killing of the children of Bethlehem is dramatically represented by the anger of Herod, the callous cruelty of the soldiers and the hopeless denunciations and pitiful lamentations of the mothers. With scornful understatement the first soldier comments, as the first woman approaches with her child:

“Yonder commys vnceyll (*misery*)  
I hold here a grote she lykys me not weyll  
Be we parte.  
Dame, thynk it not yll,  
Thy knafe if I kyll.” (327–31)<sup>13</sup>

The bereaved women attempt to fight back, and cry for vengeance, but are obviously helpless against the superior strength of the soldiers. Their verbal onslaught is reduced to mere name calling: ““Outt! morder-man, I say, strang tra-toure and thefe!”” (361).

Isidore describes *vituperatio* as the opposite of *laus*, praise (II 4, 5–7),<sup>14</sup> and Puttenham omits it altogether, but like sarcasm it may of course be uttered from a position of strength, as witnessed in this play by the tyrant Herod himself. As Rosemary Woolf points out, Herod is no mere raging buffoon;<sup>15</sup> he personifies evil, absurdly exaggerated though his abuse of the soldiers who have allowed the three Kings to escape may be: his anger that a King has been born in Bethlehem to supplant him has more serious consequences, and leads of course to what came to be known as the Massacre of the Innocents. However, in the long run he must be worsted, and it is with prophetic irony that he cries:

“My guttys will outt thryng  
Bot I this lad hyng;

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**13** *Magnus Herodes*, in *The Wakefield Pageants in the Towneley Cycle*, ed. A.C. Cawley (Manchester University Press, 1958). The anonymous author, from Wakefield in Yorkshire, who is known as the Wakefield Master because of the superior quality of his work, wrote six Biblical pageant plays some time during the first half of the fifteenth century.

**14** Both may be used ironically, to praise whom we wish to blame, or blame whom we wish to praise: “Ironia est, cum per simulationem diversum quam dicit intellegi cupit. Fit autem aut cum laudamus eum quem vituperare volumus, aut vituperamus quem laudare volumus. Vtriusque exemplum erit, si dicas amatorem reipublicae Catilinam, hostem reipublicae Scipionem” (Isidore, *Etymologiae* II, xxi, 41). The example of Catiline as a lover of the republic and Scipio as its enemy resembles those frequently found in the *Ad Herennium*, like that of Aeneas and Hippolytus referred to in n. 10 above.

**15** Rosemary Woolf, *The English Mystery Plays* (London: Routledge, 1972), 202–11.

Withouit I haue a vengyng,  
I may lyf no langer.

Shuld a carll in a kafe bot of oone yere age  
Thus make me to rafe?" (240–45)

Inadvertently anticipating his own death,<sup>16</sup> he signals with impotent fury his inability to achieve the most wicked of his purposes.

For Puttenham in *The Arte of English Poesie*, "*sarcasmus*" is essentially "the bitter taunt," though how or why used he does not discuss. Launched from a position of superiority, hostility need not be so overt as in cases like Herod's; as was claimed of the satire of writers like Dryden, Fielding and Pope, its purpose might be to reform rather than to crush. That intention is perhaps clearer in the case of Puttenham's next sub-branch of *allegoria*, the civil jest or "mery skoffe" (Isidore's *astysmos*, "urbanitas sine iracundia," mockery without malice) though it must be said that the examples he gives show little difference in degree from those grouped under *sarcasmus*. Nor indeed do they show much of the positive aspect of irony, against which the deviation deserving of derision is to be measured, though wit, of a certain rather crass kind, is evident. These sub-branches are anticipated in, if not actually derived from, the *Ad Herennium*, though not similarly named there, where Frankness of Speech, the figure under which the tropes of allegory are discussed, is summarised: it is to be handled either with pungency, which if too severe should be mitigated with praise, or with pretence, which is of itself agreeable to the hearer's frame of mind.<sup>17</sup>

But a sarcastic gibe is hardly frank, however poignant it may be, cloaking cruelty under an artistic veneer of respectability. It would be inconsistent with the character, say, of Chaucer's pilgrim Knight, who "nevere yet no vileynye ne sayde" (*General Prologue*, 70), while, in its verbal substitute for overt violence, still pretending to the meekness, even kindliness, of the Knight's genuine courtesy.

Chaucer's pilgrims, and the conventionalized characters of romance and fabliau alike, tend to be types rather than individuals; but *ad hominem* attacks, though seldom displaying the bite of, say, Pope's portrayal of "Atticus" (Addison), "willing to wound, and yet afraid to strike," or of "Sporus" (Lord Hervey), "this bug with gilded wings,"<sup>18</sup> may indeed be found, especially in fifteenth-cen-

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<sup>16</sup> The Wakefield Master erroneously attributes a death like that recorded of Judas (Acts 1:18) to the Herod of the massacre (Matthew 2:16), confusing him with the Herod who died spectacularly eaten by worms (Acts 12:23).

<sup>17</sup> *Ad Herennium*, 355.

<sup>18</sup> Alexander Pope, "Epistle to Dr Arbuthnot, being The Prologue to the Satires."

tury political verse. For his “punning and allusive” lampoon on Richard III and his ministers, “The Cat, the Rat, and Lovel our dog / Rule all England under a hog,” which he nailed to the door of St Paul’s, Wyllyam Collyngbourne, surely one of history’s most unfortunate poets, was hanged and disemboweled on Tower Hill.<sup>19</sup> Whether the distich can be called sarcastic or not, it was certainly bitterly derisive, the sort of hate speech that could not be tolerated by a political authority under threat from a hostile army.

Though she does not deal with sarcasm as such in her discussion of medieval realism, Pamela Gradon does point to two significant features, particularly of medieval satire, that show it might deserve a place there: what she calls “picturation,” and “the deictic mode.” Quoting Gower’s lament for the decline of the world at the beginning of the prologue to the *Confessio Amantis*, she writes, “Here the satirical mode is akin to the romance mode in that it involves the posing and exemplification of a standard against which actuality is to be measured. Anti-curial satire is essentially of the same kind, in that it tends to imply a contrast between the life of the court and the simple life of honesty and contentment.”<sup>20</sup> One might expect a sarcastic *bon mot* to display such a contrast, whose effect is secured by a witty picture that colors it, together with a pointed indication of the behavior that needs to be amended.

The satirical opening of Dryden’s *Absalom and Achitophel*, “In pious times, ere priestcraft did begin,” suggesting that those who should be the guardians of religion lack its essential quality, exhibits that irony tending towards sarcasm even in its sweeping generalization. A similar suggestion of hypocrisy, directed against an individual, though one supposedly typical of the class to which he belongs, underlies Chaucer’s depiction of his Shipman, whose pretended benevolence to those he captures at sea is exemplified by the fact that he sends them home to every land—but “by water,” that is, by tossing them overboard.<sup>21</sup> A beast of a similar kind, less subtle, but more startling, is Haidée’s piratical father, in Byron’s *Don Juan*: “He was the mildest mannered man / That ever scuttled ship, or cut a throat.”<sup>22</sup>

But these examples are not direct derisive taunts, however severe, and it may not be easy to find in medieval literature examples that fit every aspect of what we nowadays expect sarcasm to entail. The carol ostensibly praising women,

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19 V.J. Scattergood, *Politics and Poetry in the Fifteenth Century* (London: Blanford Press, 1971), 21, 211.

20 Pamela Gradon, *Form and Style in Early English Literature* (London: Methuen, 1971), ch. 5, “Medieval Realism,” 273–331; quotation from 319.

21 *Canterbury Tales* I, 400.

22 *Don Juan*, Canto III, stanza xli.

where every verse is contradicted by the refrain "Of all Creatures wommen be best / Cuius contrarium verum est," is hardly subtle (unless, as Greene suggests, it seeks to take sly advantage of women possibly listening to the carol being recited, whose Latin is probably as little as Pertelote's),<sup>23</sup> and has no specific individual reference: it is a blunderbuss rather than a rifle, fired with little trace of the "saeva indignatio" of Juvenal or Swift, at a conventional target for mockery, not intending to reform but simply, it would appear, to demonstrate the poet's virtuosity. This seems to be true also of the punctuation poems, of which Robbins prints three, that may be repunctuated to say the opposite of their pretended praise of, respectively, priests, greedy oppressors, and women.<sup>24</sup> Nor is Pandarus's attempt to persuade the gloomy Troilus, depressed by his loss of Criseyde, to lengthen his stay at the festive Sarpedoun's, though doubtless a civil gibe, and ironically exaggerated, fierce enough to qualify as Puttenham's *sarcasmus*, the "bitter taunt"—"Be we comen hider," asks Pandarus when Troilus wants to leave as early (!) as the fourth day, "To fecchen fir and rennen hom ayein?"<sup>25</sup> It is a disappointed whine rather than a stern rebuke.

In *Le Bone Florence of Rome*, Garcy, a decrepit old knight, woos the lovely young heroine chiefly, it seems, because he wants to be kept warm at night. Dieter Mehl compares them to Januarie and May in Chaucer's *Merchant's Tale*, but a closer parallel is to be found in I Kings 1, where King David, old and cold, is given the young girl Abishag to take to bed in lieu of a warming pan. Florence, however, has the nerve to reject her aging lover, but it is the narrator, not she, who, as Dieter Mehl describes it, "comments sarcastically that he would have been better served with a bright fire, a good bath and a warm bed (ll. 97 ff.) than with a young maiden."<sup>26</sup> Even here, however, he may simply be stating a fact, for the better understanding of the audience listening to his poem, though certainly the implication is that the old knight is a fool not to know better. The narrator's sarcasm, to the extent that it should be so described, can have no effect on him, and it is Florence's refusal that drives him to make war on her peo-

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23 R.L. Greene, ed., *The Early English Carols*, 2nd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), number 399, 235–6, with notes at 451–2. For Pertelote's lack of Latin see Chaucer's *Nun's Priest's Tale*, *Canterbury Tales* VII, 3163–66.

24 E.g., of priests: "Trvsty. seldom to their ffriendys vniust / Gladd for to helpp. no Crysten creator / Wyllyng to greve ..." R.H. Robbins, ed., *Secular Lyrics of the XIVth and XVth Centuries* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1952), numbers 110–112, 101–2. Shakespeare employs a similar joke in Peter Quince's prologue to the rude mechanicals' play of Pyramus and Thisbe in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*.

25 *Troilus*, V, 484–5.

26 Dieter Mehl, *The Middle English Romances of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (London: Routledge, 1968), 141.

ple in Rome. What might be called dramatic sarcasm, an ironically phrased rebuke in the mouth of one of the characters in a text, is absent in this case.

Nor can there be said to be sarcasm, or even invective, in the name-calling and rebukes with which virgin martyrs like Saints Margaret and Juliana abuse the devils that assail them, before, indeed, physically pitching into them. To call a devil “earme steorue,” “forcudest alre þinge,” “ful wiht,” (wretched, pestilent creature; most hateful thing of all; foul creature) as Margaret does, is merely to describe him; and although he cannot love her, he has no option but to address her in response as “lufsume leafdi” (beloved lady); nor, apparently, is the author being ironic when relating how “Þet milde meiden Margarete” seizes the devil by his hideous top, swings him round and smacks him on the ground before setting her foot on his neck.<sup>27</sup>

Restricted to their diabolical nature, demons, like personified abstractions, offer a writer less scope for free invention than do anthropomorphic birds. The eponymous protagonists of *The Owl and the Nightingale*, a debate poem setting forth the rival claims of secular enjoyment and religious duty, may seem likely to want to score points against each other by sarcastic sallies, but as it happens they are too busy either directly abusing each other or rebutting the accusations levelled against them to give much thought to subtle gibes. Even when they do seem to do so, it is hard to be sure whether they are being sarcastic or not. Nevertheless, some possible, and indeed probable, instances will be examined.

*The Owl and the Nightingale* appears, like a burst of sunlight on a murky day, at the threshold of the Middle English period, to delight by its unexpected sophistication and literary excellence.<sup>28</sup> The avian rivalry, based on the nature of the birds, is comical but never clownish; they are civilized enough to be willing to submit their case to judgement, and there are serious human implications for their charges and counter excuses.

The poet sets forth the uncompromising antagonism of the birds at the outset: theirs is no friendly taunting, for they would as soon have settled their hostility by a violent physical assault if they had had the opportunity:

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<sup>27</sup> *Seinte Marherete þe Meiden ant Martyr*, ed. Frances M. Mack, *EETS* 193 (London, 1934), 28 and 30. Cf. *St Iulienne*, ed. S.T.R.O. d'Ardenne (Liège, 1936), 41 and 46: “Me 3e eateliche wihtes qð þet eadi wummon” (“‘Why, you loathesome creature,’ said that blessed woman”) before violently assaulting him. These vernacular prose *Lives* probably date from the late twelfth or early thirteenth centuries.

<sup>28</sup> Unexpected because at this date (c. 1200) authors possessed of such skill and learning would normally write in French or Latin, but less surprising when considered against the wider Latin clerical tradition of the time: for an analysis see Derek Pearsall, *Old English and Middle English Poetry* (London: Routledge, 1977), 88–94.

An aiper azen oper sval (*swelled*)  
 & let þat vvole mod ut al; (*evil mood*)  
 & eiper seide of operes custe (*character*)  
 Þat alre worste þat hi wuste. (*knew*) (7–10)<sup>29</sup>

It is not necessary here to trace the involved course of the debate, except to say that its general trajectory is from the physical to the moral and then the religious, reflecting on the appearance and song of the birds, then on their habits, and finally on their usefulness to humankind in domestic and religious affairs. The derisive taunts (*hostilis inrisio*) they level at each other may be examined for the degrees of "seueritie" (*amaritudo*) they display.

The Nightingale begins with an unflattering description of the Owl's appearance: "Thou art lodlich (loathsome) to biholde" (71) at all points: "Þi bodi is short, þi swore (neck) is smal / Grettere is þin heued þan þu al" (73–4); also, you have sharp bill and claws, and it's no wonder other birds are afraid of you. The size of the Owl's head is hardly a subject deserving of mockery, though perceived differences are often judged offensive because they may seem threatening. For the Nightingale the Owl's large head becomes a sign, in the borrowed fable of the owl who left its egg in a falcon's nest, of its filthy habits. "Who," the falcon asks its chicks "befouled the nest?" A chick replies, "Iwis, hit was ure o3e broper, / Þe 3ond, þat haued þat grete heued" (118–19). Delighted by the fancied success of its sallies, the Nightingale sings triumphantly, while the Owl is so angry it swells up as if it had swallowed a frog.

The tone of the passage is comic: superficially true, the Nightingale's initial accusation is easily rebutted; certainly slanderous, it lacks the subtlety of sarcasm. Nevertheless the Owl retorts that its adversary has tried to hide deceit behind fair words (158) and scornfully renames it "Galegale," to suggest that its vaunted chirping is merely empty avian garrulity. Going further, the Owl compares birds that chide against it to foul-mouthed shepherds (286), thus degrading the Nightingale to a place in the company of the coarsest riff-raff. The illustrations used by both birds are, after all, earthy rather than elegant; vituperative, but without the regulatory comparison illustrated by Isidore.

The Owl levels a sarcasm that might well boomerang when she says that the Nightingale's shrill chattering does no more good among men than does "a wercche (wretched) wranne" (564). The Owl may simply be alluding to the Wren's smallness and insignificance, or be motivated by antagonism, for Aristotle and Pliny refer to enmity between wrens and owls, and the Wren at the end of

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<sup>29</sup> Quotations are from *The Owl and the Nightingale*, ed. E.G. Stanley (Manchester University Press, 1960, 1972).

the poem favors the Nightingale. More significantly, the Owl overlooks the fact that the contemptible Wren was elected king of the birds for soaring highest, after stealing a boost on the wings of the eagle; and finally it is the Wren that warns the contestants not to break the King's peace but to submit to the judgement of Nicholas of Guildford, to whose dwelling at Portesham the Wren can direct them. The Wren is in fact superior to the two birds in that it is better acquainted with the ways of men (1723–28). Accordingly the Owl is quite as willing as the Nightingale to follow the Wren's advice and directions. The author does not say whether or not he meant an ironic contrast between the Owl's earlier sarcasm and this later incident to be noticed, and we can only guess that he noticed it himself.

The Owl concludes this part of her argument not with sarcasm but straight forward jeering: my nest is clean and well-constructed, but you like to do your singing behind people's privies. You'll never find a sufficient answer to this charge, so “‘Hong up þin ax!’” (655–58). The poet admits that the Nightingale is indeed flummoxed, and must resort to cunning, which succeeds against strength when one has to argue against the truth.

The Nightingale's singing doesn't only represent unspiritual frivolity, for she claims to sing in church to remind everyone “‘Hu murie is þe blisse of houene’” (728). There may be sarcasm in the rhetorical question with which the Owl answers this argument, “‘Wenest þu hi bringe so lýtliche / To Godes riche al singinge?’” [“Do you expect to conduct worshippers so easily to God's kingdom all (joyously) singing?”] (854–55). The Owl favors the Church's more traditional method of requiring tears of repentance (“‘mid longe wope...Of hore sunnen’”—with protracted weeping for their sins [857–8]). The poet may be addressing those in his audience who are delighted by romances of love, which they may need reminding won't bring people to Heaven. Accordingly the Owl blames the Nightingale for singing that only entices “‘men to fleses luste’” (895). The Nightingale thus loses the joy of Heaven

“For nis on þe non holinesse;  
Ne wened na man for þi pipinge  
Þat eni preost in chirce singe.” (900–902)

Can the Nightingale exercise any priestly function at all? The Owl asks why she does no missionary activity, failing to sing to the Irish, the Scots or the wild Scandinavians, adding

“Wi nultu þare preoste singe (why won't you sing to the priests)  
An teche of þire writelinge (and teach with your chirping)



An wisi hom mid þire steune (and instruct them with your voice)  
Hu engeles singeð ine heouene?" (913–16)

Whether or not Stanley is right that here the Owl "concedes, perhaps ironically, that the Nightingale with her voice might teach the inhabitants of the barbarous North how angels sing in heaven,"<sup>30</sup> the Owl is certainly being sarcastic, for she has not conceded at all that anyone, presumably not even the ill-instructed barbarian priests, would ever mistake the Nightingale's unholy singing for that of a priest.

Goaded first to wrath, which with difficulty she suppresses, and later to such fury that she would, if a man, have resorted to arms, the Nightingale comes up with the apparently crushing argument, conceded, she claims, by the Owl herself, that the Owl is of no use to mankind except as a scarecrow when dead. The one redeeming feature of its ugliness is that it makes an excellent scarecrow: "Ac þu art shueles suþe god" (1122). The irony makes this probably the Nightingale's most telling sarcasm, but the Owl is able to retort that the Nightingale is of no use to men either dead or alive.

As a final example of possible sarcasm in this poem, when the little birds burst into triumphant song because they think the Nightingale has won the contest, the Owl scornfully asks, "not without irony," Stanley comments in his note to lines 1668–78, if the Nightingale has called out an army: "Hauestu, heo seid, 'ibanned ferde, / An wultu, wreche, wið me fizte?'" (1668–69). The Nightingale's small friends would have no chance against the larger birds that the Owl could call upon if necessary.

Hostile and bitter as the birds' taunts undoubtedly are, some more severe than others, to what extent they are meant to be sarcastic, that is, to subject by conveying an ironic concession, or are simply harshly descriptive, is in most cases hard to determine.

In the following instances, though, I wish to consider two occasions in medieval literary texts where a situation of dramatic conflict does give rise to what seems to be intentional sarcasm. Both occur in a dialogue between a man and a woman who could be lovers but for the present are at loggerheads, where in one case the man bluntly occupies the position of power, while in the other it is the woman who smugly does so.

In John Clerk's *'Gest Hystoriale' of the Destruction of Troy*, Paris rebukes Helen for her excessive weeping in the following lines:

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30 E.G. Stanley, *The Owl and the Nightingale*, 30.

“And þou drunkyn hade dewly as mony du sopis,  
 As shottes of shire water has shot fro þin ene,  
 Thou faithfully were fillid vnto þi faire swyre.” (3299–3302) <sup>31</sup>

I take this to mean, “If you had drunk up as many dewdrops as spurts of bright water have gushed from your eyes, you surely must have been filled right up to your pretty neck!”

One may appreciate, if not necessarily sympathise with, Paris’s exasperation as he likens Helen to a vat full of tears, a gushing water tank. What will it take to shame her into curbing the interminable flood? But while a modern reader may smile at the physiological absurdity of the picture, it is not clear that Paris, or even John Clerk, is fully aware of how wildly he is exaggerating. Plentiful weeping is common in the romances, from hero or heroine alike; Cligés weeps so bitterly when saying goodbye to Fenice, though he had eagerly sought his uncle’s permission to go and prove his manhood in Britain, “that the tears moisten his tunic and ermine.”<sup>32</sup> If it may be literally possible to cry one’s eyes out,<sup>33</sup> who knows how many litres of dew Helen may be capable of containing?

What may resonate more tellingly with a modern audience is the brusque male arrogance that Paris displays. Paris has just carried off Helen, left her at the ships in order to return to battle and complete the rout of her townsfolk, sailed to the “castell Tenedon” (originally of course the island of Tenedos) and sent from there to inform Priam in Troy some miles away of his successful exploit. This has taken several days, during which we are to understand that her weeping has continued unabated. Now he chivvies her into understanding that, since there is nothing she can do about his appropriation of her as legitimate booty, she might as well stop indulging in women’s conventional expression of distress, and cheer up. Brutal as this may be, he is not entirely a brute. Indeed, we are told that he pities her, as do all the people, and most of

31 G.A. Panton and D. Donaldson, eds., *The ‘Gest Hystoriale’ of the Destruction of Troy*, EETS 39 and 56 (1869–74, rpt. London, 1968), 107. For the discovery of the author’s name in an acrostic, see T. Turville-Petre, “The Author of *The Destruction of Troy*,” *Medium Ævum* 57 (1988): 264–9. The lines are Clerk’s version of Guido’s “Sane saturata esse debes tantis ex lacrimis; si tot gustasses continuos potus aque quot lacrimas diceris sorbuisse, uelud superuacue pleno de pectore iam manarent.” Guido delle Colonne, *Historia destructionis Troiae*, ed. N.E. Griffin (Cambridge, Mass., 1936), 77. Guido’s work was completed in 1287; Clerk’s translation was probably made soon after 1400.

32 W.W. Comfort, ed. and trans., *Chrétien de Troyes: Arthurian Romances* (London: Everyman, 1914, 1967), 146.

33 Cf. *The Owl and the Nightingale*, line 990: the Nightingale accuses the Owl of weeping and screaming so forcibly “‘Pat ut berste bo þin e3e.’” For the idiom, see *OED* s.v. “cry”, vb, 10b.

his address to her is courteous and appeasing, assuring her that all the wealth of Troy will be hers, besides the status and authority of queen. And accordingly she acknowledges that she must accept her situation and make the best of it.

In the parallel passage in Caxton's *Recuyell*, "parys confortet her the moste swetely þ<sup>t</sup> he coude." He uses some straight talking, but without sarcasm: "Ne wene not ye that this sorowe hurteth your helthe . yes verayly lady / ye make to moche therof / wherfore fro hens forth I pray yow to leue And take reste."<sup>34</sup> His health warning anticipates damage to her beauty, which had immediately captivated him, and since a few pages earlier she was already enamored of him because of his good looks, it is little wonder that she quickly capitulates when he talks sweetly!

But in the *Gest Hystoriale* a passage that might simply portray the kindly pacifying of a distressed female by her considerate lover is made harsher both in the context of Helen's captive situation and by the isolated moment of sarcasm that reveals her abductor's anger at her intractable response to him. It also shows that he doubts her sincerity: does she really need to lament so much? Perhaps she hopes that the more she weeps, the more likely she is to get compensation. One aim of sarcasm is to demonstrate the falsity thought to lie behind an appearance of genuineness.

A subtler example of sarcasm, from a more accomplished poet, occurs in Chaucer's *Wife of Bath's Tale*. The hag who has tricked the condemned knight into marrying her watches in amusement rather than irritation as he wallows miserably in bed beside her.

Greet was the wo the knyght hadde in his thought,  
Whan he was with his wyf abedde ybrought;  
He walweth and he turneth to and fro.  
His olde wyf lay smyllynge everemo,  
And seyde, "O deere husbonde, benedicitee!  
Fareth every knyght thus with his wyf as ye?  
Is this the lawe of kyng Arthures hous?  
Is every knyght of his so dangerous? (*reluctant*)  
I am youre owene love and youre wyf;  
I am she which that saved hath youre lyf,  
And, certes, yet ne dide I yow nevere unright.  
Why fare ye thus with me this firste nyght?  
Ye faren lyk a man had lost his wit.  
What is my gilt? For Goddes love, tell it,

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34 *The Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye*, Written in French by Raoul Lefevre, Translated and Printed by William Caxton (c. 1474), ed. H. Oskar Sommer (London, 1894), II, 534–5. Guido has "An putas quod tibi ipsi non obsit et tue persone non inferat detrimentum?"

And it shal been amended, if I may.”  
 (*Canterbury Tales*, III [D] 1082–1097)

Chaucer’s “picturation” is not encapsulated in a single visual image like Paris’s comparison of Helen to a tun of dew, but expressed dramatically by the smiling hag’s pretended wonder at her wallowing bridegroom’s unhappy behavior. It is as if Paris, having subdued Helen by sheer masculine might and a sharp verbal reminder of her subordinate status, should suddenly find himself a helpless victim in the hands of a female tyrant. The knight’s casual humiliation of a helpless peasant girl has resulted in an apparently irremediable disabling made worse by his ugly wife’s bland assumption that he must be mad not to like his victimization.

It is one of Chaucer’s most humorous passages. Everything the hideous hag says is sweetly expressed, entirely justified, and for her unwilling husband quite insupportable. Pointedly deictic, her rhetorical questions redirect his gloomy misunderstanding of his situation to the real folly of his predicament. Obviously not every knight has so uncomfortable a wedding night, nor can there be any law in Arthur’s house enforcing such sexual reluctance. The hag’s sarcasm simultaneously describes the knight’s unacceptable behavior and reveals its absurdity. In saying “it shal been amended” she is careful to use the passive voice and not promise to put everything right herself, for in the last resort his distress is something that only he can amend, by changing his attitude towards her and laying aside his assumption of masculine power that he demonstrated in so carelessly ravishing the maid he found in his territory.

She is fully aware of her superiority and that the amending of his misery is quite within their joint capability, provided he pass the last test, of willing submission to her authority. But first in what must be for him an agonising curtain lecture, she will demolish his reasons for disliking her, that

“Thou art so loothly, and so oold also,  
 And therto comen of so lough a kynde  
 That litel wonder is thogh I walwe and wynde.”  
 (1100–1102)

Derek Pearsall comments, “What the Wife of Bath is doing, in the long homily (1109–1216), is systematically to shred away the last vestiges of recalcitrant maleness in the knight and reconstitute him in her own image, which is, paradoxically, his own true image too.”<sup>35</sup>

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35 Derek Pearsall, *The Canterbury Tales* (London, 1985, rpt. Routledge, 1994), 88.

The delicacy with which Chaucer makes the incident humorous may perhaps be best appreciated by contrast with the ballad of the amorous witch Alison Gross. The reluctant object of her unwanted attentions is in a not altogether dissimilar predicament from that of the knight in the Wife's tale, but whether it was meant to be as funny as we are likely to find it is uncertain. The ballad as extant dates no doubt from the eighteenth century, but in oral tradition may be much older.<sup>36</sup>

O Alison Gross, that lives in yon tower,  
The ugliest witch in the north countrie,  
Has trysted me ae day up till her bower,  
And mony fair speech she made to me.

She straiked my head, and she kembed my hair,  
And she set me down saftly on her knee,  
Says,—“Gin ye will be my lemman sae true,  
Sae mony braw things as I would you gi'e.”

Unlike the hag's husband, the victim here has only one objection to the witch: her extreme ugliness, for which no bribe can compensate. In reply to her advances his speech is anything but fair: he does not try to cloak his aversion with subtle evasions or sarcastic innuendo.

“Awa, awa, ye ugly witch,  
Haud far awa, and lat me be;  
I never will be your lemman sae true,  
And I wish I were out of your company.”

The poet should perhaps be given credit for the colloquial decisiveness of this happily unmetrical sixteenth line.

The witch offers her captive a silken sark and a golden cup, but he rejects her with comical ferocity. Her response is vengeful.

“Awa, awa, ye ugly witch!  
Haud far awa, and lat me be;  
For I wadna ance kiss your ugly mouth  
For a' the gifts that ye cou'd gie.”

She's turned her richt and round about,  
And thrice she blew on a grass-green horn;

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36 Transcribed before 1806 from the recitation of a certain Mrs. Brown, and printed by Robert Jamieson, *Popular Songs and Ballads*, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1806).

And she sware by the moon and the stars aboon,  
That she'd gar me rue the day I was born.

And she does so, in a manner that strikes us as preposterous, but which may not have seemed so to believers in witchcraft. The victim, however, remains boldly defiant.

She's turn'd me into an ugly worm,  
And gar'd me toddle about the tree;  
And ay, on ilka Saturday's night,  
My sister Maisry came to me,  
  
Wi' silver bason, and silver kemb,  
To kemb my headie upon her knee;  
But or I had kiss'd her ugly mouth,  
I'd rather hae toddled about the tree.<sup>37</sup>

Presumably his compassionate sister's weekly grooming makes his condition supportable—he couldn't bear the witch to do it, when *she* straked his head and kembd his hair—until finally the Fairy Queen, for, as usual with fairy queens, unstated motives, turns him back to his “ain proper shape.” The poet does not think to ask whether she may have amorous designs similar to the witch's upon him, as is often the way of fairy queens, for her feelings for so infantile a hero may be simply maternal. In contrast, it is clear why Chaucer's characters behave as they do, and the hag's magical transformation becomes plausible as a sign of reconciliation and reward when the knight learns to accept what he cannot change.

In the ballad the initial transformation is the opposite of that in the Wife's tale, where the hag makes herself beautiful. Here the witch makes the man ugly, perhaps deservedly foisting upon him an appearance worse than that which so distressed him in her. But this may be to detect a subtlety that the ballad writer may not have intended—though, to do him justice, he has made a delightfully amusing anecdote out of absurd material.

The worm in the ballad turns, but only in retrospect: without external help his words would always be too weak to overcome the *force majeure* of the witch. But the hag's mental agility easily triumphs over the violence perpetrated by Chaucer's knight, leading to peace by negotiation rather than by physical conquest. In a similar way sarcasm may succeed by functioning as a verbal substitute for physical assault.

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37 “Alison Gross,” in *English and Scottish Ballads*, vol. 1, ed. F.J. Child (Boston, 1860), 168–70.

In conclusion, it would seem from these examples of "derision with a certain severity" that some latitude must be allowed to Puttenham's designation of *sarcasmus* as a "bitter taunt." Degrees of *amaritudo* differ too widely. By modern standards, definitions like Isidore's or Puttenham's are inadequate. Medieval instances vary from extreme invective to mild reproach.

The adversaries in *The Owl and the Nightingale* are argumentative rather than abusive, yet too incensed at each other to trouble to conceal their antagonism with subtle sallies of wit, though on occasion they may manage to do so. Paris's "picturation" of his impatience at Helen's slowness to realize how happy her lot could be with her captor is an admonitory thrust rather than a derisive rebuke; taunts, severe and bitter, are more readily delivered by such invective as Herod in his rumbustious raging on the medieval stage has recourse to.

Though the ingredients of sarcasm are present in "Cicero's" *Rhetorica Ad Herennium*, the treatise to which medieval treatments of grammar and rhetoric are most deeply indebted, it is not specifically defined or advocated there. Consequently perhaps, conscious attempts at sarcasm are rare in Middle English, and it is not always easy to be sure when a character in medieval literature is being sarcastic: he may simply mean his observation literally, or the writer may not have exploited context and emotion vividly enough. Body language or tone of voice can only be conveyed in live performance, for written sarcasm cannot reproduce the "fleering frump," the contemptuous facial expression that Puttenham, doubtless with the morality play *Hickscorner* in mind, ironically calls one of the "graces" of Hick the Scorner.

It takes a skilful author like Chaucer to suggest all the layers of meaning that effectively sarcastic comment in a humorous situation requires. In *The Wife of Bath's Tale* the hag's control of an apparently intractable situation, and her subtle handling of the knight's re-education, are beautifully represented. She demonstrates by verbal skill how the rhetoric of sarcasm can transfer power from the ostensibly powerful husband to the apparently powerless wife.

Power, says the social theorist Jean Baudrillard paradoxically, is greater when it bestows than when depriving.<sup>38</sup> Violence, like that of Corineus or Herod's soldiers, invites retaliation, even if the response is merely flight or abuse; taking from a victim, such as her freedom from Helen, implies at least an obligation, whether realized or not, to repay, and to pacify her Paris must offer her virtually unlimited wealth and status. But a gift that cannot be, or is not permitted to be, returned implies unassailable power. A sarcastic gibe is powerful in proportion

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38 Jean Baudrillard, *Symbolic Exchange and Death* (1976), trans. I. H. Hrant (London: Sage, 1993), 36 and 41–2.

as it cannot be capped by a sufficiently effective response. The Owl and the Nightingale vie with each other to find adequate answers to their accusations, and it is a moot point at the end which holds the balance of power. But the unhappily married knight in the *Wife of Bath's Tale* can only squirm while his ugly, poor and lowly born old wife reads him her powerful curtain lecture. In the end he must gratefully accept, without thought of requital, whichever of her proffered gifts she is pleased to confer on him.

Perhaps the phrase "gentle sarcasm," gentle in both Middle English senses of mild and noble, may be used to characterize her mockery. It is sarcasm without malice. Perhaps we might say, rephrasing Pope, that Chaucer has delightfully shown her as willing to strike, but careful not to wound.



Esther Bernstein

## Self-Evident Morals?

### Affective Reversal as Social Critique in Henryson's Fables

Fables have a long tradition as an educational genre. The use of fables in ancient Greek and Roman education ranged from simple penmanship exercises to complex preparation for future orators,<sup>1</sup> and medieval classrooms continued the practice of using fables. Even without the specific classroom use, fables are inherently an instructional genre. They are crafted specifically to teach about ethics through allegorical stories, often about animals and, in the earliest collections of beast fables, almost always short and sparse without much detail. These collections were likely used by orators as templates through which to make their own point about whatever issue they were addressing at the moment.<sup>2</sup> The brevity and lack of detail in the “templates,” whose morals (or epimythia) are about groups of people defined merely by an ethical description, allows orators to satirize specific social groups who are characterized by that ethical description in the fable's epimythium. The connections drawn to each fabulist's historical moment are at times satirical and at times scathing. In a slight turn from the straightforward ethical fable, Robert Henryson's late fifteenth-century Middle Scots fable collection, *Morall Fabillis*,<sup>3</sup> adds snark as it critiques the genre itself.

Henryson, in the tradition of fabulists, uses many of the templates which had already been applied to various specific situations and social groups. As all fabulists do, he names the intended object of his satire in each epimythium, but his fables subtly teach lessons beyond the apparent and stated morals. Henryson uses the genre of fables to critique its very premise of ethical instruction through allegory. In the spirit of irony, where what is meant is the opposite of what is said,<sup>4</sup> Henryson's fables at times carry a different meaning than the reader might expect. The animals' behavior is the same as in the templates Henryson draws from, but the structure and language suggests a meaning that diverges from the templates'. However, tone is an essential component of irony, and the

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1 Christian Laes, “Children and Fables, Children in Fables in Hellenistic and Roman Antiquity,” *Latomus* 65.4 (2006): 898–899.

2 Arnold Clayton Henderson, “Medieval Beasts and Modern Cages: The Making of Meaning in Fables and Bestiaries,” *MLA* 97.1 (1982): 41.

3 Robert Henryson, “Fables,” in *The Complete Works*, ed. David J. Parkinson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2010), 29–103.

4 Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (New York: Brill, 1989), 9–10.

tone of Henryson's fables is not ironic. In the epimythium of each fable, there is no indication of an oppositional meaning either. Henryson's fables veer towards the sarcastic by approaching irony but never reaching ironic status, while also maintaining the function of fables in elucidating ethical truths.

Sarcasm implies an attitude of superiority and of derision, and for a genre which uses satire against those who have strayed from proper ethics, sarcasm with its attending derision is appropriate. But this derision and shaming is usually not explicitly directed at the audience or readers of the fable but at a third party. Fables tend to create an object of common derision which can be held up as an example of what not to emulate rather than shaming the audience itself. In that same tradition, the sarcasm in Henryson's fables does not explicitly shame the reader for the improper behavior addressed in the epimythia. Instead, via subtle changes within each fable and epimythium, Henryson leads the reader's emotions in multiple and sometimes conflicting directions. Since fables are intended to be easily understood allegories of social realities, the twists in Henryson's fables subtly and snarkily critique the social functions of their own genre.

In the late fifteenth-century text *Steinhowels Asop*, Heinrich Steinhowel defines fables as fictions "composed so that through the invented words of unreasoning animals lower than himself a man may recognize an image of the ways and habits of human virtue," and explains that fables use animals to elucidate human nature.<sup>5</sup> Certainly the brevity of early beast fables and their epimythia displays a simple, inherent logic to the functioning of both the animal world and the social human world. Critics tend to rely on this interpretation as the default in medieval reception of beast fables, and to comment on the use of fables themselves as delivery mechanisms for naturalizing politics and rules of social order. Though fabulists presumably attempted to use flat animal characters to represent natural order and human nature, the very idea of these terms is complicated by the history of the word "nature."

The entry on nature in Raymond Williams's collection of keywords of culture and society explains how the word morphed from its meaning of "the essential quality and character of something" to "the inherent force which directs either the world or human beings or both" and "the material world itself, taken as including or not including human beings."<sup>6</sup> In its earlier form, stemming from the Latin verb *nasci*, to be born, it already assigned essential qualities to an object or

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5 "...darumb erdacht worden, daz man durch erdichte wort der unvernunftigen tier under in selber ain ynbildung des wesens und sitten der menschlichen wurde erkennt." Qtd. and translated in *Caxton's Aesop*, 11 and note 16.

6 Raymond Williams, *Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society*, 3rd ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 164–5.

being. The term “human nature,” or the nature of humans, already assumes that all humans share an essential quality. By the fourteenth century, with the idea of an inherent set of rules, a natural order governing every facet of existence, “human nature” would have indicated that not only do all humans share an essential quality, but all humans share the same driving force. A concept of a shared human nature and an inherent natural order is a necessary aspect of the function of fables, but according to most critics of the fables, it also is a result of the genre’s conventions.

Epimythia such as that of Caxton’s fable “The Bee and Jupiter” (1484) draw seemingly inevitable conclusions about social order, regardless of variations in cultural perception of what society means and how it functions. The bee asks Jupiter to allow him to sting anyone who tries to steal his honey and Jupiter grants him this request, with the stipulation that the act of stinging will kill the bee as well. The concluding epimythium, “men ought not to demaunde of god / but suche thynges that ben good and honest,”<sup>7</sup> claims an inherent relationship between wishing harm on others and coming to harm oneself. This relationship is a social ideal, because it would ensure that each individual acts in a manner which facilitates the health of society as a whole. Fables naturalize this ideal situation in order to prescribe effective social behavior—effective, that is, in maintaining a specific social order and cohesion.

By the late Middle Ages, as fables made their way into literature of various uses including pleasure as well as education, the natural quality of social interaction became less simple to represent. Most medieval fables, like the majority of Marie de France’s, retain the brevity of the ancient examples. But the fable’s use in teaching *amplificatio* meant that others, such as Lydgate’s collection, use tens of lines to tell fables which were previously told in only ten or twelve. Although this allows for much greater social realism, with the animal characters situated more firmly within the social context that medieval readers know, it also inhibits the fable in its naturalizing function. With greater detail and nuance in the animals’ characters and stories comes the possibility of readers’ awareness that these relationships, while beneficial to politics and the social order, are not in any way inherent or natural.

Robert Henryson’s *Morall Fabillis*, in addition to expanding the fables and creating the potential for this awareness, also exposes the methods and conventions of the fable genre itself to interrogation. While other medieval collections

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7 William Caxton, *Caxton’s Aesop*, ed. R. T. Lenaghan (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967), 172. [Page numbers and line numbers for primary texts will follow translations in parentheses.]

expand the fables but ignore the ambiguities raised by the more complex characters, Henryson's fables could generate uncomfortable emotional and intellectual reactions which subvert the traditional fable's naturalization of social norms, even as they continue to serve the usual function of prescribing social behavior. The subtlety of the subversion adds a level of snarkiness to the fables, now potentially aimed at readers who may or may not recognize the effects of the twists and changes.

In the first fable, "The Cock and the Jasp," the narrative might have the reader nodding in agreement as the cock rationally decides to leave the gem in the dung heap since it has no nutritional value. The jolt delivered when moving from this to the epimythium, where this very cock is ridiculed for not recognizing the inherent value of the gem, could engender an uncomfortable confusion and uncertainty, which sets the tone for the rest of the collection. At first, it may seem Henryson is playing a joke on his readers in setting up a clear expectation for one outcome and then providing a very different one in the epimythium. Throughout the following fables, however, it becomes apparent that the confusion and snark are not a joke at the expense of his readers but purposeful commentary on the assumption of natural social order and the function of fables in perpetuating that assumption.

Aesopian fables like the collections of Romulus and Avianus are never meant to elicit from the reader an emotional connection to the animal characters, relying on self-evident epimythia resulting largely from a point-by-point intellectual rather than emotional interpretation of the fables. The logic of the epimythium, however, depends primarily on the association of each animal with a single trait, an association which may differ across time but which an author could expect his own contemporaries to accept without question. In his introduction to Vernon Jones's translations of Aesop's fables, Chesterton explains that one-dimensional animals are favored in a genre whose main purpose is social and ethical instruction because this avoids the complications to the epimythium which would result from human complexity:

Suppose, for a moment, that you turn the wolf into a wolfish baron, or the fox into a foxy diplomatist. You will at once remember that even barons are human, you will be unable to forget that even diplomatists are men. You will always be looking for that accidental good-humour that should go with the brutality of any brutal man; for that allowance for all delicate things, including virtue, that should exist in any good diplomatist.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> G. K. Chesterton, Introduction to *Aesop's Fables*, ed. V. S. Vernon Jones (New York: Doubleday, 1916), ix.

Readers of fables are primed to see animals as flat characters with one trait each, avoiding the complication humans would introduce with other motives.

Henryson's fables challenge the naturalization of social rules and illustrate that the "plainest truths"<sup>9</sup> offered by the simplicity of each animal as an expression of a single trait are in fact the result of social conditioning of responses to those animals and traits, not the cause of those responses. He adds nuance to the animals' characters, which complicates the connection between narrative and epimythium, just as human complexity would. Instead of a seemingly obvious logical compatibility between narrative and epimythium, Henryson's fables cultivate a potential emotional reaction which is later revealed to be socially wrong. The adjustment from this wrong reaction would require the reader to become aware of having been guided by emotion, which subverts the fables' traditional purpose of presenting logical truths, and to switch back to an intellectual comparison. Henryson asserts his superiority in an apparently derisive and snarky display of his ability to manipulate readers' expectations in order to disappoint them.

The difference between an intellectual and an emotional comparison, however, might not be that great, which would mean that defining earlier, shorter fables as intellectual and Henryson's as emotional is not really useful in trying to understand how they are effective. Beginning in the 1990s, work on emotion and cognition has indicated that while these are generally understood as two completely separate systems, in fact emotion may simply be an "overlearned cognitive process."<sup>10</sup> Human emotions are not completely innate but developed, not completely personal but social or cultural. Children are acculturated to expect certain emotions in response to specific situations, which results in the regular emergence of the culturally accepted emotion regardless of how the child may actually feel. Eventually, when cognitive processes have been sufficiently nurtured by social expectations, people will produce the "right" emotion in each situation.

An early example provided by psychologists Alice Isen and Gregory Diamond is "the way in which little boys have often been taught to keep from crying by substituting anger for sadness...."<sup>11</sup> The masculinity of anger is not inherent

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<sup>9</sup> Chesterton, Introduction to *Aesop's Fables*, ix.

<sup>10</sup> William M. Reddy, *The Navigation of Feeling: A Framework for the History of Emotion* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 16.

<sup>11</sup> A. M. Isen and G. A. Diamond, "Affect and Automaticity," in *Unintended Thought*, eds. J. S. Uleman and J. A. Bargh (New York: Guilford Press, 1989), 144.

but is rather cultivated because it serves social functions.<sup>12</sup> Emotions such as shame and pride are often taught until they become automatic reactions because the social order depends on people self-regulating. Once these emotional responses are ingrained, people will tend to distance themselves from those acts which carry negative social consequences and produce the learned cognitive reaction of shame, and will engage instead in those which carry positive social consequences and produce pride.

The subtle twists of Henryson's fables wreak havoc on these expected patterns of emotional reaction, as they complicate the overlearned cognitive processes. The turn at the end of the fable or in the epimythium might cause the reader of Henryson's fables to realize that although he thought he was responding properly as he read the fable, his emotional response has actually been socially unacceptable all along. Though the reader might feel like the butt of a snarky joke at this point, the potential change happens so subtly that Henryson would not be blamed for toying with readers' emotions and expectations. The shame of the misguided reaction would be placed squarely on the reader, who then appropriately adjusts his reaction. The affective reversal extends the role of a genre in which social edification is an important component, as the dissonance between fable and epimythium might force a change of allegiance to specific characters, inserting the potential for realization of the history and evolution of these "natural" stories. The discomfort the reader might feel exposes both the reader's first emotional response as well as the "corrected" emotional response as socially motivated.

Henryson's narrative style is effective in exposing the social motivation because the medieval adult reader has already acquired the pathways of reaction and emotion which society has deemed proper and which allow fables to work as they do. Children still need to be trained in socially acceptable reactions, and fables were an excellent way to not only utilize but actually produce these overlearned cognitive processes. Fables were used in the medieval classroom primarily for Latin exercises, but they also functioned as social instruction. Those used for educational purposes were short and easily memorized,<sup>13</sup> facilitating recitation and paraphrasing, most often with epimythia of only a few lines each. When a child encounters concise epimythia following brief narratives,

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<sup>12</sup> Medieval literature's celebration of non-masculine emotions in knights highlights the way emotions can be defined and redefined according to the desired social outcome.

<sup>13</sup> Jill Mann, "Beast Epic and Fable," in *Medieval Latin: An Introduction and Bibliographical Guide*, ed. Frank Anthony, Carl Mantello and A. G. Rigg (Washington: Catholic University of America Press, 1996), 556.

the child learns explicitly about the natural social order, as well as implicitly about which emotions are socially desirable or appropriate and which are not.

The second fable of Caxton's late fifteenth century Avianus collection, "The Tortoise and the Byrdes," teaches the social function of pride, one of the more important in ensuring that each member of society fulfills his proper role. It begins with a premythium and ends with two epimythia, each complementary to the others. The premythium is a description of how things ought to work: "He that enhaunceth hym self more than he oughte to do / To hym oughte not to come noo good" [He who is more prideful than he ought to be, no good ought to come to him] (177). In the subsequent narrative, a tortoise promises to show an eagle precious stones if the eagle will carry her high above the earth, but when she is in the air and cannot see the earth in order to find the stones, she is killed. The epimythia elaborate on the premythium:

For he that wyle haue and gete worship and glorye may not haue hit withoute grete labour / Therefore hit is better and more sure / to kepe hym lowely than to enhaunce hym self on hyghe / and after to deye shamefully and miserably / For men sayn comynly / who so mounteth higher / than he shold / falleth lower than he wold.

[For he who would have and get worship and glory may not have it without great labor. Therefore, it is better and more sure to keep himself lowly than to raise himself in pride and then die shamefully and miserably. For as men say, whoever climbs higher than he should falls lower than he desires]. (177–8)

The second epimythium is essentially "Pride goeth before a fall," which itself teaches children to be wary of excessive pride. How to determine when pride is excessive is clear from the combination of the premythium's "more than he oughte" and the first epimythium's connection between "grete labour" and "grete worship and glorye." Social order is enforced when each member of society knows the relationship between the work expected of him and the result he can expect from it, as well as the emotions appropriate to his social station. The fable teaches children that the emotion they feel when desiring things beyond their station is excessive pride, and that this kind of pride is a shameful emotion to feel. The premythium and epimythia, easily memorized and recited, are essential tools in making sure the children will not feel pity for the tortoise but will read the fable properly and understand that the tortoise's death was a natural result of her socially inappropriate behavior.

With their clear educational and instructional purpose and yet the danger of being misread or misinterpreted, fable collections often begin with a fable demonstrating the proper way to read the text. One common opening fable is "The Cock and the Gem," which is classically used as an admonition against leaving valuable knowledge aside in favor of more mundane pursuits. Henryson begins

his *Morall Fabillis* with “The Cock and the Jasp,” but while his epimythium is in fact the traditional one about proper appreciation of knowledge, his narrative leads the reader in a different direction before asserting the hope that the reader will properly appreciate the fables. Manipulating the reader in this superior and sarcastic manner, Henryson leaves the reader confused, but while his final hope for proper interpretation could be taken as a snarky closing line, the medieval reader would have been familiar with other collections which do the very same thing. The blame is transferred from Henryson’s sarcastic joke to the reader’s failure to see the joke coming.

In Henryson’s opening fable, the cock is looking for food but comes across a gem in the dunghill. He leaves the gem since it will not provide him with nourishment: “Thy cullour dois bot confort to the sicht / And that is not aneuch my wame to feid” [Your color provides comfort only to the sight and that is not enough to feed my belly] (100–101). He has a robust appreciation for the objective value of the gem but recognizes that this value can be realized only by someone of the proper status, someone who need not be concerned with finding food and can devote attention to luxuries:

Thow art ane jowell for ane lord or king....  
It is pietie I suld thee find for quhy  
Thy grit vertew nor yit thy cullour cleir  
I may nouthir extoll nor magnify,  
And thow to me mak bot lyttill cheir,  
To grit lordis thocht thow be leif and deir.

[You are a jewel for a lord or a king...It’s a shame I should be the one to find you, because I can neither extol nor magnify your great power or your bright color, and you can give me hardly any feast, though to great lords you would be precious and dear]. (81–89)

The reader might respond to this speech with approval, recognizing that each member of society must know what is appropriate for his station. The cock knows the jasp belongs “in ane royall tour” or “on ane kingis croun” (107–8), and “Levand this jowell law upon the ground / To seik his meit this cok his wayis went.” [Leaving this jewel upon the ground, this cock went on his way to seek his food] (113–4).

Additionally, the narrator relates how this gem may have gotten to the dunghill in the first place:

He fand ane jolie jasp richt precious  
Wes castin furth in sweeping of the hous.  
  
As damisellis wantoun and insolent  
That fane wald play and on the streit be sene,



To swoping of the hous thay tak na tent  
 Quhat be thairin swa that the flure be clene,  
 Jowellis ar tint as oftymis hes bene sene  
 Upon the flure and swopit furth anone.

[He found a brilliant piece of very precious chalcedony [jasper] that had been cast out during the sweeping, as when irresponsible and rebellious maidservants who would rather play and be seen in the streets take no care about the sweeping of the house and what may be therein, just as long as the floor is clean. Jewels are lost on the floor as has often been seen, and are swept out at once]. (69–74)

Henryson's gem hypothetically winds up in the dunghill because humans, lazy and irresponsible maidservants, have unwittingly swept it out of the house along with the dirt. These girls are not addressed in the epimythium at all, but it is obvious within the fable itself that they are foolish for not recognizing its worth. Their characterization implies that women are not included in the category of those able to appreciate the value of the gem, but their complexity disturbs the moralizing possibility. They are not merely representative of feminine foolishness but have other foolish agendas as well, being "wantoun and insolent / That fane wald play and on the streit be sene" (71–2). As Chesterton explains, their complexity makes them less useful for the epimythium than a one-dimensional animal representative of one clearly defined trait.

Throughout his logical speech to the jasp, the cock seems to be representative of the characteristic of practical thought, not of foolishness. It would rather be foolish to take the jasp when he is actually looking for food. But the startling switch in the epimythium says that the cock "may till ane fule be peir" [can be equivalent to a fool] (142). This places him in the same category as the foolish girls for not knowing how to value something of great worth and instead "desyr-and mair the sempill corne / Than ony jasp" [desiring mere corn more than any jewel] (141–2).

The epimythium of this fable begins with a catalog of the gem's properties – marvelous color like fire and heaven, inspiring might in man, providing good luck. The gem is now representative not of something pretty and useless as nourishment, but rather an object with an abundance of qualities. No longer is the cock wise for knowing his place, but foolish for not realizing that this gem, representative of knowledge, can take him higher:

Quha may be hardie, riche, and gratiuous?  
 Quha can eschew perrell and aventure?  
 Quha can governe ane realme, cietie, or hous?  
 Without science, no man, I yow assure.  
 It is riches that ever sall indure

Quhilk maith nor moist nor uther rust can freit.  
To mannis saull it is eternall meit.

[Who is able to be courageous, rich, and benevolent? Who can avoid peril and jeopardy? Who can govern a realm, a city, or a house? Without knowledge, no man, I assure you. These are riches which shall endure forever, which neither maggots nor moisture nor other kinds of dampness can consume. This is eternal merit to man's soul] (134–40).

The epimythium is not that one should know the relative worth of each object or that one should know who is best suited to appreciate each object, but that one's priorities must be properly aligned to recognize "Quhilk is sa nobill, precious, and ding / That it may with na eirdlie thing be bocht" [something which is so noble, precious, and exalted that it may be bought with no earthly thing] (150–1).

Although Henryson's epimythium jars with his own narrative of the fable, his epimythium is in fact almost exactly what most previous authors of this fable have written. Lydgate, in contrast to most fabulists, delivers in his epimythium what Henryson's narrative leads the reader to expect. Lydgate begins with a detailed description of the cock's virtue in always working hard to find food for his family rather than trying to get rich, and the epimythium is that the same way "The cok demyd, to hym hit was more dew / Small simple grayne, þen stones of hygh renoun," man must realize that "Eche man þerfore with suche as God haþ sent, / Thanke þe Lorde, in vertu kepe hem stable." [The cock realized small simple grain was more fitting for him than stones of high value; Likewise, each man must keep himself steadfast in strength with what God has sent, thank the Lord] (213–4, 222–3).<sup>14</sup> Lydgate's cock displays wisdom in knowing that a gem does not suit someone of his social category, and he also spurns the gem because it does not fulfill the purpose of his search, which is to provide for his family.

While Lydgate portrays the awareness of relative value as an attribute, Marie de France portrays this as a defect in the cock. In her fable, as in Lydgate's, the cock comments on the lack of connection between his original search and his find. According to Lydgate, the gem is best left where it is when the cock realizes it does not suit his purpose. But Marie de France asserts that although the gem does not serve his original purpose, the cock is foolish for not realizing that it has other value, the epimythium being that foolish people who are too intent on one purpose will scorn true treasure when they come across it:

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<sup>14</sup> John Lydgate, *Isopes Fabules*, ed. Edward Wheatley (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publication, 2013).

Autresi est de meinte gent  
 Si tut [ne] veit a lur talent.  
 Cum del cok e de la gemme,  
 Veü l'avums de humme e de femme:  
 Bien e honur mut poi present;  
 Le pis pernent, le meuz despisent.

[Many people are like this  
 When something does not suit their wish.  
 What for the cock and gem is true  
 We've seen with men and women too:  
 They neither good nor honour prize;  
 The worst they seize; the best, despise.] (17–22)<sup>15</sup>

Though the focus on what wisdom constitutes is different, both Lydgate and Marie de France use the fable as a straightforward exhortation to seek wisdom.

Henryson's version of this fable, however, does more than traditionally introduce a collection with an exhortation to seek wisdom. In a brilliant appropriation of traditional fable maneuvers, Henryson generates an emotional state in the reader, just as socially cultivated as the one on which the epimythium depends, which he later exposes as socially misguided. By conditioning the reader to expect an epimythium along the lines of Lydgate's in which the cock is praised for knowing his place, but then stating one resembling Marie de France's in which the cock is foolish for not recognizing true value, the technique of an affective reversal allows the fable to do double duty. It introduces the fable collection in a traditional manner, with the hope that the reader will understand its wisdom, and its final snark also calls into question the traditional wisdom of the genre of fables itself, suggesting that the connections between the narrative elements and the epimythia are not as logical as had previously been assumed.

Caxton's version of "The Cock and the Jasp," roughly contemporary with Henryson, is more similar to Henryson's version than is either Lydgate's or Marie de France's. In both Caxton and Henryson, the cock reasons that he and the gem are worthless to each other. In both versions the cock is then scorned by the fabulist for not recognizing value and is then likened to a fool who does not recognize wisdom. But although both tell the same tale with very similar details, the style of Caxton's much briefer fable does not cause the reader to identify with the cock and therefore require a switch to dis-identification with the animal in order to align his sympathies with the epimythium, as Henryson's does. Whereas the cock in Henryson's speaks for thirty-three lines of verse, Caxton's is given about five lines of prose:

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15 Marie de France, *Fables*, ed. Harriet Spiegel (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1994).

“Ha a fayre stone and precious thow arte here in the fylth And yf he that desyreth the had found the / as I haue he shold haue take the vp / and sette the ageyne in thy first estate / but in vayne I haue found the / For no thyng I haue to do with the / ne no good I may doo to the / ne thou to me”

[Oh, fair and precious stone, you are here in the filth. And if he that desires you had found you as I have, he would have taken you up and set you again in your rightful place. But in vain have I found you, for I can do nothing with you. I may do no good for you, nor you for me]. (74)

Henryson's provides details of the gem's value; Caxton's speaks in generalities. Henryson's explains why a chicken has no use for a gem; Caxton's merely says that he has no use for it without explaining why. Caxton's version muddies the earlier simplicity of the cock's foolishness but does not address the complications he has introduced. The eloquence and sound logic of Henryson's, on the other hand, could create a relationship with the reader which should not allow the cock to be thought of as a fool.

But Henryson does not change the epimythium from its original purpose in appearing at the start of a fable collection. Ultimately, the cock in Henryson's fable is a fool despite his sound logic, and Henryson by extension has therefore sarcastically called the reader, who may have been convinced by the cock, a fool as well. The expansion and social realism of Henryson's fable, along with the shift of the fable's lesson, throws into sharp relief what the usual brevity obscures: that the lessons to be learned from these fables are dependent on a mode of thought which ignores complexities, and that these lessons are not natural or universal but instead are a creation of a socially cultivated mode of thought. The subtlety of the shift means that most readers would not be likely to recognize the lesson about lessons, and would not register the shift as a snarky joke. The implied comment about the socially cultivated mode of thought depends on the reader's ability to recognize the joke and share in the sarcastic attitude towards those who are the oblivious butt of Henryson's manipulation and snark.

Most of Henryson's fables do preserve the original epimythia in some form. His collection is not subversive in the manner of changing social reality or of freeing individuals to respond according to their "real" emotions instead of socially mandated emotions. Rather, the fables work as a modest social critique for readers who catch on to Henryson's sarcasm by allowing them to become aware that all of the emotions they feel, both those they assume are instinctive and "real" and those they have adjusted to, are not necessarily their original emotions and are instead guided and activated by society's expectation and education. In fact, the affective reversal that the reader might experience in Henryson

often means that the traditional epimythium could have a stronger impact than other, non-subversive versions do.

Although the reader would not consciously set out to switch emotions, the reversal might happen as it becomes apparent that the original response is not appropriate to the rest of the narrative or to the epimythium. Sianne Ngai explains that when someone experiences an emotion that is not socially acceptable, an “affective disorientation” occurs, a “meta-feeling in which one is confused about *what* one is feeling.”<sup>16</sup> In works of literature, “the negative feeling of ‘disconcertedness’...is intimately tied...to the ‘loss of control’ explicitly thematized in each moment of stalled or suspended action.”<sup>17</sup> With the stalling of the fable’s trajectory and abrupt but undetectable switch, the reader is left with an affective disorientation, a confusion about what he is feeling, so that the original emotion must be suppressed but the meta-feeling must be equally done away with. Most readers will experience this fleetingly and on a subconscious level, but for those who recognize what has happened to them, the sarcastic joke is evident.

The attempt to suppress any emotion—as with the attempt to suppress any thought, as Reddy explains that the two are virtually the same—will, however, intensify that emotion. Ngai, citing a psychoanalyst, calls this a “global affect of ‘against’.”<sup>18</sup> In the vein of the “don’t think of pink elephants” scenario, when someone is asked to *not* think something or *not* feel something, in order to carry out that mental task, it is impossible for the subject to completely remove the thought. Instead, as he performs a mental check to ensure he is completing the task, the thought or emotion to be removed is brought into greater prominence in his mind.<sup>19</sup> With the affective reversal produced by Henryson’s fables, an emotion is not suppressed but is instead changed into something else. However, this change must occur almost seamlessly as the reader moves on in the fable. The complex process that the reader is not even aware of—realizing the initial response is wrong, feeling shame at having failed social expectations, feeling the derision of the author, and switching to the correct response—follows the same pattern as an attempt to suppress an emotion. But in this case, the second, corrected emotion will be intensified.

The “Preaching of the Swallow” fable does this most clearly in *Morall Fabillis*. The fable begins with an introduction of ninety-eight lines before the narrative itself starts. The human who observes the birds and narrates the events from

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<sup>16</sup> Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 14.

<sup>17</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 14.

<sup>18</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 11.

<sup>19</sup> Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, 11.

his point of view first explains that, although the secrets of God's work are incomprehensible to man, "Yit nevertheles we may haif knowlegeing / Of God almychtie be his creatouris" [yet nevertheless we may have knowledge of almighty God through his creations] (1650–1), justifying the purpose of fables again. He goes on to a leisurely foray into the beauties of nature and springtime, ending with the human observer's appreciation of the birds' arrival, "Rycht mervellous" (l. 1733). After an opening with a tone of such wonder and joy at all the details of nature and spring, the reader would be primed to approach the "mervellous" birds in the same way. Throughout the majority of the poem, the human narrator fades into the background, while the birds are merry and invite the reader to identify with them in various ways, even though the reader must surely expect the swallow's dire predictions about the fate of the birds to be fulfilled.

As the birds all frolic, the swallow advises them to prevent future danger rather than waiting for it to happen:

Quhair danger is or perrell appeirand  
It is grit wisdom to provide befor  
It to devoid for dreid it hurt yow moir

[Where there is danger or peril approaching, it is great wisdom to get ready in advance so as to avoid it for fear it will hurt you more]. (ll. 1738–40)

When the lark laughs and asks, "Quhat have ye sene that causis yow to dreid?" [What have you seen that causes you to worry?] (1741–2), the swallow replies that the farmer has planted flax seeds and that the birds should eat them before he can use the flax for nets with which to catch and kill the birds. The lark's response that "The nek to stoup quhen it the straik sall get / Is sone aneuch. Deith on the fayest fall" [For the neck to bend when it gets the blow is soon enough. Death falls on the most fated.] (ll. 1766–7) is obviously foolish. The examples she provides fall far short of the swallow's elegant rhetoric. Of course death comes to everyone, but if something can be done to delay the inevitable death, it should be done. Though the reader would undoubtedly be aware that the swallow's warning will be what actually happens and that death need not have come so soon, the pleasant feelings from the opening descriptions of nature and of the merry birds might linger, and the emotions that might be produced at this point are more aligned with the lark than the swallow. The tone of the swallow's speech in contrast with the carefree birds also might cause the reader to identify with the birds as victims, against the swallow, who appears to be almost a bully.

The human narrator who is observing the scene describes how the birds "scornit thay the swallow ane and all. / Despysing thus hir helthsum document"

[scorned the swallow one and all, despising her beneficial advice] (1768–9). His own negative attitude toward the carefree birds is apparent and may give the reader pause as the lark's "scorne" so clearly denotes an attitude not quite acceptable to society. But it would be only a momentary pause as the birds disappear in flight and the narrator returns to a neutral tone and goes home to wait until he can follow up and observe what happens next in "June that jolie tyde" [June, that lovely time] (l. 1776), which is described again with a decidedly pleasant air. Throughout the rest of the fable, the reader might be pulled between the pleasant tone with which the narrator began and the obvious foolishness of the birds in not listening to the swallow's warnings of doom and despair. The reader would know the swallow is the wise one and should be the one identified and empathized with but might not be able to stop feeling pity for the birds who just want to have fun and impatience with the swallow who keeps hampering that.

By the end, though, these foolish birds are captured exactly as the swallow predicted and

Allace it wes rycht hertis sair to se  
 That bludie bowcheour beit thay birdis down  
 And for till heir quhen thay wist weill to de  
 Thair cairfull sang and lamentatioun.  
 Sum with ane staf he straik to earth on swoun,  
 Sum off the heid, off sum he brak the crag,  
 Sum half on lyfe he stoppit in his bag.

[Alas it was great pain at heart to see that bloody butcher beat those birds down and to hear, when they fully expected to die, their sorrowful song and lamentation. Some he struck unconscious to earth with a staff, some he broke the head off, some the neck, some he stuffed half alive into his bag]. (1874–1880)

The reader's pity and empathy for the birds would turn to horror at their gruesome deaths, but at the same time, the reader would know that this was to be expected and that the sense of horror should not be directed at these foolish birds, who could, after all, have prevented this if they had only listened. The birds are deserving of contempt rather than empathy. The human narrator does admit to feeling "grit hartis sair" at the horror of the birds' death and their "cairfull sang and lamentatioun." But in contrast to the other moments when the human observer is visible in the action of the text, here he does not speak of himself in first person at all. The slight distance the narrator creates between the great pain and his own perception indicates his awareness that it is misplaced pity.

This is the point where the affective reversal of emotions might happen, as the reader would no longer be able to maintain the socially unacceptable attachment to the flock of birds or the disdain for the swallow that Henryson's idyllic opening set up. As the narrator abandons his position as merely interested observer and introduces problematic emotional responses, the reader's empathy for the birds and disdain for the swallow might become a kind of shame at even feeling these emotions which society has conditioned the reader to think of as a wrong emotional response. These feelings would then be sublimated into the "correct" emotions and associations, so that the reader would feel disdain for the birds and would identify with the self-righteousness of the swallow. Along with being sublimated, the emotions are also intensified as a result of the global affect of "against," so the scorn for the birds becomes an overwhelming scorn, and pride in the vindication of the swallow's wise foresight becomes fierce pride. For readers who can see this effect, the epimythium of foresight and removing oneself from vain worldly temptations is layered over by another unwritten epimythium, a comment on the fact that human emotions work in a cultural environment and cannot themselves be trusted as pure indicators of an individual's inner state. The readers who are aware of this feel Henryson's derision but also can see that this sarcastic move was intended not to inflict shame for the sake of shame but to guide them to a new insight.

"The Preaching of the Swallow" appears at about the halfway point of *Moral Fabillis* and displays this technique most strongly. Other fables throughout the collection have the result of an affective reversal to varying degrees, and some don't have it at all. The effect of critiquing the social construction of emotional responses, though, is apparent especially from the way the collection begins and ends with fables that question the reader's emotional connection to the animal characters and ability to extract and understand epimythia. The first fable, "The Cock and the Jasp," is traditionally used to guide readers in the proper interpretation of fables, and as explained above, features the affective reversal quite prominently. The last fable, "The Paddock and the Mouse," is even more jarring than the destruction of sympathetic characters in "The Preaching of the Swallow" because the epimythium would not be expected throughout the fable as it is with the swallow.

"The Paddock and the Mouse," the last fable in *Moral Fabillis*, presents an epimythium more or less matching the epimythia of previous versions. In the basic plot of this fable, a frog ties a mouse to his feet in order to carry her in the water but then either attempts to drown her or is unable to free himself once she has drowned. A bird of prey, alternately a hawk or a kite, sees the commotion in the water and snatches up both mouse and frog. The traditional version of this fable, in both the ancient and medieval texts, focuses on the frog's



death as a result of his ill-advised decision to tie the mouse to his feet. They are friends, and since the mouse cannot swim, the frog ties her to his feet so they can stay together. When the mouse drowns and her body floats on the surface of the water, a hawk swoops down to catch her, and the frog, unable to untie himself in time, is also caught and eaten by the hawk. Mouse and frog are both victims, and in the style of ancient fables, the lesson learned is not a matter of justice served but of natural cause-and-effect: one who chooses ill-mated friendships will naturally suffer the consequences.

In expanded medieval versions of this fable, the frog becomes more obviously the conniving villain, offering to carry the mouse across the river and then attempting to drown her, but the mouse does not actually drown. Among the details added in various versions are the hospitality which the mouse offers the frog and the mouse's escape from the kite while the frog is eaten (Marie de France<sup>20</sup>), and an epimythium about being happy with less because the fat frog was more enticing to the kite and so was eaten first, allowing the thin, hungry mouse to escape (John Lydgate<sup>21</sup>). Henryson adds more detail even than that: First the mouse displays curiosity about the paddock's anatomical ability to swim, "I haif mervell than... / How thow can fleit without fedder or fin" [I am puzzled then, how you can float without feather or fin] (2805–6). Once the toad explains, her ugly face prompts a philosophical debate on the efficacy of determining character by facial beauty:

"Giff I can ony skill of phinomy,  
Thow hes sumpart of falset and invy.

For clerkis sayis the inclinatioun  
Of mannis thoct proceidis commounly  
Efter the corporall complexioun  
To gude or evill, as nature will apply."

...

"Na," quod the taid, "that proverb is not trew  
For fair thingis oftymis ar fundin faikin..."

[“If I know any skill of physiognomy, you have some amount of deceit and envy. For scholars say the inclination of man's thought usually proceeds to good or evil in accordance with his bodily qualities, as nature will apply them” ... “No, said the toad, that proverb is not true, for beautiful things are often exposed as deceitful...”]. (2824–2834)

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20 Marie de France, *Fables*.

21 Lydgate, *Isopes Fabules*.

Finally, with the mouse still not fully convinced, she elicits a slippery oath from the paddock to bear her across the water:

“...sweir to me the murthour aith  
But fraud or gyle to bring me over this flude  
But hurt or harme.” “In faith,” quod scho, “I dude.”

[“...swear to me this murder oath, without fraud or guile, to bring me across this river without hurt or harm.” “In faith,” she said, “I will do it.”]. (2865–7)

After these additions, the fable follows the same pattern as the other medieval versions: the paddock ties the mouse to her feet and then attempts to drown the mouse when they’ve reached the middle of the river. The nearby kite sees the commotion and snatches up both creatures, and in this version not only eats the two of them but skins and flays them, described by the narrator in gruesome detail.

The features added in Henryson’s version only add to the empathy the reader would feel for the mouse in the earlier versions. The earliest versions of the fable, including the *Romulus*, create no sympathy for the mouse or the frog, both of whom are simply unhappy victims of poor choice. In Marie de France and John Lydgate’s versions, the reader is obviously meant to feel sympathy for the mouse and rage at the frog, with the result that when the mouse escapes, the reader feels relief and vindication. Henryson, however, offers no such release. The reader might begin to root for the mouse to triumph over the villainous paddock. The reader could be endeared to the mouse by her plight at wanting to get across the river to the field of grain, by her frank curiosity about how anatomy works and her subsequent doubts about the paddock’s appearance and trustworthiness, by the caution she displays in demanding an oath from a stranger who has offered her help. When the struggle in the water begins, the reader might be emotionally invested in the mouse by then and would wait for the battle raging between the paddock and the mouse to be triumphantly resolved in the mouse’s favor.

But then the kite swoops in, creating an abrupt interruption between the narrative events and the resulting epimythium. Any outcome of the struggle between the paddock and the mouse is obliterated, and the emotional connection is gone. Instead, the reader would be left with shock resulting from the gruesome details of the skinning and flaying of not only the animal he has come to see as the villain but also the animal he has identified with. When the epimythium is read now, it becomes a perfunctory intellectual comparison rather than emotional. Saying that one must be careful of choosing companions has lost all its emotional power, because it apparently doesn’t matter: the final downfall did not re-

sult directly from this dilemma, since the mouse was killed by the kite, an outside threat, and not the frog, the badly chosen friend. Besides, the shocked reader might say, the mouse had actually taken all possible precautions to ensure that she would choose safe companions and therefore does not deserve to die. Ending with a comparison of the kite to death and to life's uncertainty does nothing to return the emotional connection the reader originally felt with the mouse.

"The Paddock and the Mouse" is the culmination and most stark example of a maneuver Henryson consistently employs. The collection uses all the conventions of the traditional genre of fables to comment not only on the specific lesson of each fable, but also on the shifting of "natural" causal relationships. Many fables in this collection cultivate a potential emotional connection which is destroyed by the end of the tale or is revealed as misguided by the epimythium. Once the reader becomes aware that his emotional connections are not compatible with the intended epimythium, he would experience an affective reversal in an attempt to align his emotions with what society says they should be. While the fables do teach social norms, they also highlight the social constructedness of those norms and of the emotions which validate those norms. The preservation of accepted epimythia throughout the collection suggests that medieval readers would not have questioned the epimythia themselves, but that the careful generation of a range of emotions may have produced an awareness of the social construction of the "natural order" and of the emotions which allow the logic of fables to function. Readers who recognize the effect of Henryson's manipulation can appreciate the employment of sarcasm to present new possibilities rather than simply to deride.



Patricia Sokolski

# Let's Not Get Snarky about Derision!

## Fabliau Husbands and Wives in Conversation

Folie est d'autrui ramprosner,  
Ne gens de chose araisounerand  
Dont ils on anuy et vergoigne;  
(Le Sentier Batu – Jean de Conde)

It is foolish to be snide to others,  
to accuse people of things  
that will bring shame and harm;  
(The Beaten Path – Jean de Conde)<sup>1</sup>

Stories of wives cheating on their husbands with younger men are popular entertainment across time and culture. However, if the infidelity plot was well-known in the thirteenth-century fabliaux, these short tales marked new and unfamiliar social and economic changes happening in the countryside and the towns of Northern France and Flanders. A peasant from Normandy coming to the market would have to transition to new forms of exchange as money replaced bartering. There would also be many more town dwellers—or *bourgeois*<sup>2</sup>—to interact with: craftsmen who had emigrated from the countryside and merchants who had been *vilains* or sons of the aristocracy turned to commerce.

If one of these bourgeois wanted to get married, he would have to follow some new rules: His future wife would have to consent to the union, banns would have to be published, and a priest would also have to make sure that the marriage could be contracted.<sup>3</sup> No longer solely a private affair in the hands of the families and governed by local customs, marriage was a process increasingly controlled by the Church. Outside his house, our bourgeois had to follow the sumptuary laws appropriate to his class.<sup>4</sup> At the market or the local fair, our man probably also enjoyed listening to a performer deride him and his peers in a fabliau.

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1 Anatole de Montaiglon et Gaston Raynaud, *Recueil général et complet des fabliaux des XIIIe et XIV siècles imprimés ou inédits* (Burt Franklin), Tome Troisième, LXXXV, 247–252. Volumes and pages appear in parenthesis. The translations are mine.

2 Simone Roux in *Les racines de la bourgeoisie* (Sulliver, 2011) and other scholars use the term *bourgeois* and *bourgeoisie* to refer to the townspeople of the 12th-century *bourgs*. The words *burgher* or *patrician* are also found.

3 Paul Halsall. "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, March 1996, Canons 50–51. <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lat eran4.asp>.

4 Léopold Thézard, *Du luxe et des lois somptuaires* (Niort: L. Clouzot, 1867), 22–24.

To create laughter, the fabliaux rely on the reversal of the expected order. Out of 147 surviving fabliaux, 81 involve a married couple and an extra-marital relationship.<sup>5</sup> Most plots are based on the premise that women's sexual needs are too great and that their husbands are inadequate, so the wives will cheat with young knights, students, or clergymen. Rather than repressing women's desires, the stories depict wives expressing their own desires, resisting domination, showing contempt for their husbands' sexual abilities, and getting away with cheating. The audience probably laughed watching the fableors<sup>6</sup> ridicule the bourgeois or peasant husbands and describe the punishment suffered by the priests. Considering the socio-historical context of the fabliaux' production and the Church's emphasis on consent and affection as a basis for marriage, these fabliaux may have warned the emerging bourgeoisie of the negative impact of this type of marital interaction while entertaining them.

If laughter was accepted, laughing at the expense of others was not. Closely linked to *sarcasmos*, *derisio* is more appropriate to describe the interactions of the fabliau characters in the following examples. Unlike the common definition of *sarcasmos*, *derisio* is direct in its intent. The speaker is explicit, so the recipient of the comment is well aware of its meaning. However, *sarcasmos* as "flesh tearing" derision implies a conqueror and a conquered,<sup>7</sup> which is not typically the case in the fabliaux. This may explain why sarcasm is mentioned only a few times in the long history of fabliau scholarship. Mary Jane Schenck writes that there is only one fabliau with "a blatantly sarcastic moral,"<sup>8</sup> which Norris Lacy, paraphrasing Schenck, refers to as irony rather than sarcasm because of the uncertainty of authorial intent.<sup>9</sup>

There are many studies on the role and purpose of irony in the fabliaux. Joseph Bédier, whose definition of the fabliau as "conte à rire en vers" remains in use today, writes of the fabliaux that they represented "l'esprit gaulois" and the "joie de vivre" of medieval people and were "un tour ironique de niaiserie maligne" and "la dérision amusée."<sup>10</sup> Per Nykrog argues that the audience was the aristocracy who laughed at the bourgeois and villains trying to act like the aris-

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5 Marie-Thérèse Lorcin, *Façons de sentir et de penser: les fabliaux français. Essais sur le Moyen-Âge 6* (Paris: Champion, 1979), 21.

6 I chose the word "fableor," which means either author or story-teller.

7 Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1989), 170–177.

8 Mary Jane Stearns Schenck, *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception* (Amsterdam and Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1987), 30.

9 Norris J. Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux* (Birmingham: Summa Publications, Inc., 1999), 146.

10 Joseph Bédier, *Les Fabliaux*, 6th ed. (Paris: Champion, 1964), 340.

toocrats.<sup>11</sup> Thomas Cooke mentions that the fabliaux show “narrative, dramatic, verbal, cosmic” irony, but that the structure of the fabliau is never ironic.<sup>12</sup> DuVal and Eichmann argue that the use of irony made the fabliaux sophisticated tales.<sup>13</sup> Norris Lacy sees the irony in the fabliau when two systems of logic clash<sup>14</sup>, and Muscatine, when two systems of value clash.<sup>15</sup>

In a chapter titled “Irony as a Trope,” Mary Jane Schenck summarizes the fabliau scholarship and concludes that the variety of plots and the lack of organizing principle for the fabliaux make it possible for a loose understanding of irony. Organizing the fabliau characters into victims and dupers, she argues the irony results from the audience’s always knowing more than the dupers, as well as from the verbal irony the dupers use as a weapon.<sup>16</sup> Brian Levy reinforces the concept of winners and losers and through re-occurring images shows the irony and playfulness of the fabliaux.<sup>17</sup> As difficult as it is to generalize about the fabliaux, what is consistent is the use of dramatic and verbal irony, not sarcasm, to create laughter. To find sarcasm as *derisio*, a contemporary concept, provides a useful frame to analyze the conversations of the fabliaux’ husbands and wives.

*Derisio* was one of the twenty-four sins of the tongue in the system of sins developed by thirteenth-century theologians.<sup>18</sup> Among the definitions of *derisio* offered by Casagrande and Vecchio in *Les péchés de la langue*, Raoul Ardent in *Speculum universale* suggests that *derisio* aims at inciting anger or laughter in the audience and shows contempt for the person ridiculed. Robert Grossetete in *De Lingua* proposes four types of derision. *Derisio* is the result of pride and irreverence or insolence and foolishness. It can also be used to fool and to harm or to be cruel and laugh at others’ hardship.<sup>19</sup> In the *Summa*, Thomas Aquinas considers *derisio* a vice “against justice insofar as it amounts to mocking or making fun

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11 Per Nykrog, *Les Fabliaux* (Geneve: Librairie Droz, 1973), 104.

12 Thomas Cooke, *The Old French and Chaucerian Fabliaux: A Study of their Comic Climax* (Columbia & London: University of Missouri Press, 1978), 141–143.

13 John DuVal and Raymond Eichmann, *Cuckolds, Clerics, & Countrymen: Medieval French Fabliaux* (Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982), 10.

14 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 121–124

15 Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (Newhaven, London: Yale University Press, 1986), 158.

16 Schenck, *The Fabliaux: Tales of Wit and Deception*, 93–108.

17 Brian Levy, *The Comic Text: Patterns and Images in the Old French Fabliaux* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2000), 242.

18 Carla Casagrande and Silvana Vecchio, *Les péchés de la langue* (Paris: Les editions du Cerf, 1991), 275–280.

19 Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés*, 280. My translation.

of people because they lack what they cannot help lacking, insofar as it amounts to dismissing their misfortunes ‘and treating them as a joke,’ which conflicts with charity.”<sup>20</sup> He opposed *derisio* to *pietas* (piety) a subcategory of *iusticia*, the virtue of justice, and added that the intention of *derisio* is to shame the person toward whom the comment is addressed.<sup>21</sup> In the fabliaux, *derisio* is used in two ways: husbands and wives intentionally mock each other and the narrators mock their characters and the audience.

Identifying derision in the fabliaux can be challenging because we can only imagine how the nonverbal communication of the fableors, their tone, volume, emphasis, and gesture, would have constructed the meaning of the story for the audience.<sup>22</sup> The markers of verbal irony proposed by modern linguists are useful for recognizing instances of *derisio*. In addition to the traditional phonological (intonation, nasalization, speech rate) or facial (eyebrows, eyes, winking, nodding, smiling, blank face), Attardo identifies two types of alerts speakers use to call hearers’ attention to the irony: metacommunicative alerts are verbal or nonverbal comments that tell the hearer that the utterance is ironic; paracommunicative alerts are additional comments, not necessarily directly related to the utterance itself but which, understood in the context of the utterance, will point to the irony.<sup>23</sup>

In the fabliau *De l’enfant qui fu remis au soleil*, the metacommunicative alert is a subtle comment from the fableor. When a merchant is away on business, his wife becomes pregnant and gives birth to a son. Upon her husband’s return, she tells him that, after a snowflake fell on her tongue, she became pregnant. Many years later, the husband, who never accepted his wife’s story, decides to take his son to sell him during his travels. When he arrives home without his son, she is devastated. At that moment, the fableor says:

De respondre ne s’est tenuz  
 Cil, qui moult biau parler savoit.  
 “Dame, selonc ce que l’en voit  
 Doit chascuns le siècle mener;  
 Quar en trop grant duel demener.  
 Ne puet-il avoir nul conquest.”

20 Brian Davies, *Thomas Aquinas’s Summa Theologiae: A Guide and Commentary* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 256.

21 Casagrande and Vecchio, *Les péchés*, 277. My translation.

22 See Brian J. Levy in *Performing Medieval Narrative* for his examples on the ways fabliaux may have been acted by one or possibly more jongleurs or fableors.

23 Salvatore Attardo, Jodi Eisterhold, Jennifer Hay, and Isabella Poggi, “Multimodal Markers of Irony and Sarcasm,” *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 16.2 (Jan 2003): 243–260.



[He didn't refrain himself to answer  
 this one who knew how to speak well.  
 "Dame, with all that we see,  
 we must continue to live  
 because in too much grieving,  
 there is nothing to gain."] (I-166).<sup>24</sup>

Describing the husband as somebody who knows how to speak alerts the audience that his words are meant to hurt delicately. The advice the husband gives his wife clearly refers to the fact that he had no choice but to accept the son, and now she has to do the same. Even if the logic of the husband's comment does not fit ours, it fits perfectly in the context of the story.<sup>25</sup> In a few words, the fableor cleverly draws attention to the irony of the situation as well as to the husband's sarcasm and cruelty. The paracommunicative alert also comes from the narrator in *Celle qui fu foutue et desfoutue por une Grue*. The fableor mentions at the beginning of the story:

Ce dit Garin, qui dire sialt,  
 que jadis fu uns chastelains,  
 qui ne fous ne vilains,  
 ainz ert cortois et bien apris.

[Garin, who knows how to narrate, tells  
 that there was once a castellan  
 who was neither crazy nor a villain,  
 but rather courteous and literate.] (10–13)<sup>26</sup>

When the audience learns that this man keeps his daughter locked up in a tower to protect her, the meaning of "not crazy" and "courteous" becomes questionable. Here too, the situation is ironic, but considering the audience of the fabliaux, it may be that the fableor is mocking the landowners by calling their attention to the contradiction between the behaviors expected of them and their actions. In both these fabliaux and in the ones about marriages, the meta- and the paracommunicative alerts help us identify *derisio*, as well as see the elegance and craft of the fableors.

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<sup>24</sup> Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Fabliaux*, Tome Premier, XIV, 163–167.

<sup>25</sup> Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 127–128.

<sup>26</sup> *Fabliaux érotiques*, Edition critique, traduction et notes Luciano Rossi and Richard Straub ([Paris:] Le Livre de Poche, 1992), 185–189. Line numbers follow in parentheses.

By the mid-thirteenth century, Church law on marriage is established with the impediments regarding age and consanguinity clearly defined.<sup>27</sup> Marriage is based on consent in the present tense, *affectio maritalis*<sup>28</sup> (understood as marital respect, affection, or regard), and conjugal rights. Marriage is also understood to be sacred and indissoluble. Sexual relations are considered to be only marginally sinful, since they are necessary for procreation as well as the satisfaction of natural desires. In theory, consent was the main requirement for marriage, although it took longer for the laity to accept this practice. By the end of Pope Innocent III's pontificate in 1216, which supported the Franciscans and Dominicans whose sermons helped promote the marriage doctrine to the laity, the Church's marriage requirements were finally accepted by the nobility.<sup>29</sup> In the context of the economic expansion in Europe, this new emphasis on consent, respect, and affection provided a different basis on which to elaborate a new kind of marriage for the emerging town bourgeoisie.

The absence of a consensus in the definition and the purpose of the genre of the fabliau has made it possible to see them as both transgressive and normative. For Charles Muscatine, the fabliaux expose a "hedonistic materialism" promoting pleasure and consumption, as well as a reaction to the straight clean language of the romances.<sup>30</sup> Howard Bloch, in *The Scandal of the Fabliaux*, argues that the fabliaux reject a fixed understanding of meaning, status and society. The poets steal and create meaning and understanding and disrupt all common assumptions about the meaning of the stories.<sup>31</sup> Simon Gaunt argues the fabliaux destabilize and expose the artificial nature of all hierarchies by showing that class and gender are constructs that are constantly manipulated.<sup>32</sup> In a collection on laughter and referring to Bakhtin's reversal of order, Jean Jost calls the fa-

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27 Paul Halsall, "Medieval Sourcebook: Twelfth Ecumenical Council: Lateran IV 1215," *Internet Medieval Sourcebook*, March 1996, <http://legacy.fordham.edu/halsall/basis/lateran4.asp>.

28 Michael M. Sheehan CSB, *Marriage, Family and Law in Medieval Europe: Collected Studies* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1997), 262–277.

29 David d'Avray, *Medieval Marriage Sermons: Mass Communication in a Culture without Print* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 4.

30 Charles Muscatine, *The Old French Fabliaux* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1986) 153.

31 R. Howard Bloch, *The Scandal of the Fabliaux* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 1986).

32 Simon Gaunt, *Gender and Genre in Medieval French Literature*, Cambridge Studies in French 53 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), 36.

bliaux “humorous transgression.”<sup>33</sup> Hierarchies get subverted when wives usurp their husbands’ roles, peasants become doctors or even knights. However, the transgression happens within the institution of marriage. As Lacy points out, the fabliaux’ endings reflect the established order, which usually puts women in a position of subservience.<sup>34</sup> Even though fabliau women take charge of their own lives and desires, it is true that wives do not elope with their lovers, but stay married.

In his examination of Manuscript 837, Keith Busby notices a pattern of interaction between the fabliaux about marriage and other narratives and surmises the fabliaux sometimes serve as “negative exempla” followed by moral and edifying narratives or, on the contrary, as exempla, showing what husbands and wives together can accomplish.<sup>35</sup> This is not to say that fabliaux are exempla. Exempla were stories inserted in sermons or religious texts as illustrations for the ideas exposed and were composed of three elements: “un récit ou une description, un enseignement moral ou religieux, une application de ce dernier à l’homme” [a narrative or a description, a moral religious teaching, and a possible application to men]. In most cases, the fabliaux may be “cautionary tales,” because the moral fits the logic of the tale, not a logic based on morality.<sup>36</sup> Jean-Thiebaut Welter, Peter Van Moos, and Shenck have noted the porous connection between the exempla stories and the fabliaux.<sup>37</sup> Discussing *La Vie des Pères*, Alan Tudor confirms that common themes and motifs, as well as similar form and style, muddle the distinction between fabliaux and moralizing texts.<sup>38</sup> To help urbanize and Christianize the new town dwellers, preachers and priests

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33 Jean E. Jost, “Humorous Transgression in the Non-Conformist *fabliaux* Genre: A Bakhtinian Analysis of Three Comic Tales,” in *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2010), 429–456.

34 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 36–45.

35 Keith Busby, *Codex and Context, Reading Old French Verse Narrative in Manuscript, Vol. II* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2002,) 437–484.

36 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 121.

37 Jean-Thiebaut Welter, *L'exemplum dans la littérature didactique et religieuse du Moyen Âge* (Paris et Toulouse: Librairie Occitania Guitard, 1928), 102. Peter Van Moos, “L'exemplum et les exempla des precheurs,” in *Les Exempla medievales: Nouvelles Perspectives*, études réunies et présentées par Jacques Berlioz et Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu (Paris: Honore Champion, 1998), 69–71. Mary Jane Stearns Schenck, “Narrative Structure in the Exemplum, Fabliau, and the Nouvelle,” *Romanic Review* 72.4 (Nov 1981): 367–382.

38 Alain Tudor, *Tales of Vice and Virtue: The First Old French “Vie des Peres”* (Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi, 2005), 16–17.

used stories the parishioners could relate to in order to keep them listening.<sup>39</sup> It is in that sense that the fabliaux portraying successful marriages may have resonated differently with the audience.<sup>40</sup> As the following fabliaux about married couples will illustrate, deriding and insulting a spouse may be a common behavior, but it certainly does not make for a satisfying marriage.

In a typical fabliau plot, the wife is blamed for her insatiable sexual desires and her uncontrollable mouth; the husband, for his weakness and his sexual inadequacies. In *De Berangier au lonc cul*, *Les iiii Souhais St Martin*, and *Sir Hain et Dame Anieuse*, spouses battle to assert or regain control of the relationship. Short of a physical fight as in *Sir Hain et Dame Anieuse*, *derisio* is the weapon spouses use to undermine each other. From irreverence and pride in *De Berangier au lonc cul*, to foolishness in *Les iiii Souhais St Martin*, and cruelty in *Sir Hain and Dame Anieuse*, the fabliaux show the consequences of letting human impulses control our relationships. One spouse's desire to dominate the other makes for a marriage filled with resentment and dissatisfaction. On the other hand, *Li Sohaiz Desvez* illustrates how spouses can accommodate each other's weaknesses with respect and affection without resorting to derision.

In *De Berangier au lonc cul*, a rich villain marries his son to the daughter of a supposed impoverished knight who needs money. When the wife complains to her husband that he stays home doing nothing instead of fighting, he agrees to go out and fight. Not a real knight, he goes into the forest, beats his sword and armor against a tree to pretend he fought, and goes home to show his wife he is a worthy knight. First she believes him, but when she gets suspicious, she disguises herself as a knight and follows him into the forest. When she sees her husband on her property, she offers him a challenge: he fights her or he kisses her behind. After first offering some money, he decides to kiss her behind, but before leaving he asks her name, and she responds ““Berangier au lonc cul”” [“Bérangier of the Long Ass”]. When he gets home and finds his wife in bed with her lover, he reproaches her for her behavior, but she answers that she will call ““mesire Berangier / Au lonc cul, qui vos fera honte.”” [“Sir Bérangier of the Long Ass, who will disgrace / You once again!”].<sup>41</sup> As Norris Lacy points out, the comedy of the story lies in the fact the fableor never clearly tells us whether or not the husband ever understands that the knight he kissed was his wife.<sup>42</sup>

39 Jacques Berlioz and Marie Anne Polo de Beaulieu. “The Preacher Facing a Reluctant Audience According to the Testimony of Exempla,” *Medieval Sermon Studies* 57.1 (2013): 16–28.

40 Welter, *L'exemplum*, 3.

41 DuVal and Eichmann, *Cuckolds, Clerics, and Countrymen*, 47–58. Lines follow in parenthesis.

42 Lacy, *Reading Fabliaux*, 138.

From the beginning of the story, the audience knows this is a marriage based, not on consent, respect, and affection, but on a deal. The fableor clearly expresses contempt for the aristocracy for choosing money over lineage.

Oiez que Guerins velt retraire  
 Que il avint en Lonbardie,  
 Où la gent n'est gaires hardie,  
 D'un chevalier qui ot pris feme,  
 Ce m'est vis, une gentil dame,  
 Fille d'un riche chastelain  
 Et cil estoit filz d'un vilein  
 D'un usurier riche et comblé  
 et assez avoit vin et blé,  
 Brebis et vaches, et deniers,  
 Ot à mines et à setiers.  
 Et li chastelains li devoit  
 Tant que paier ne le pooit,  
 Ainz dona à son filz sa fille.  
 Ainsi bons lignaiges aville,  
 Et li chastelain et li conte  
 declinent tuit et vont à honte;  
 Se marient bas por avoir  
 Si en doivent grant honte avoir  
 et grant domaige si ont il.  
 Li chevalier mauvais et vill  
 Et coart issent de tel gent,  
 Qui covoient or et argent  
 Plus qu'il ne font chevalerie:  
 Ainsi est noblece perie.

[Hear it good people! Guerin will say  
 What happened in Lombardy,  
 Where men aren't known for bravery  
 To a knight errant who'd been wed  
 to a fine lady, purely bred  
 And daughter to a landed earl.  
 The young knight's father was a churl  
 Who'd gotten rich by usury.  
 His cellars were full; his grainery  
 Held all it could. He had cows and goats,  
 Dollars, deniers, marks, sous, and groats.  
 The earl was deeply in his debt  
 With nothing left to pay, except  
 To give the rich man's son his daughter.  
 That's how good blood thins down to water,  
 How counts and earls and all their race  
 Decline and finish in disgrace.

If people wed to get out of debt,  
 Disgrace is what they ought to get.  
 The harm they do cannot be told:  
 From those who covet silver and gold  
 More than nobility, a race  
 Of foolish, good-for-nothing, base  
 And chickenhearted knights descends.  
 Thus chivalry declines and ends.] (10–35).

The words to describe the families set them in opposition: usurer/money/basely born and fine families/shame/perish/tears. The husband is described as a “chevalier” [knight] or “villain” [common man] or “coart” [coward] with “gaires hardie” [little bravery,] but the wife as “une gentil dame” [a well-born girl]. Throughout the story, the fableor reinforces but at the same time undermines the class difference by using paracommunicative alerts. For the first half of the story, while the husband seems to control his image and his wife, the audience knows that he is really not a knight. First the fableor tells us “Li chevaliers amoit repos” [the chevalier loved slothful ways], and then when the wife questions his prowess, the knight says of himself, “‘ge suis chevalier sanz parece”’ [“I am not a lazy, slothful knight”]. In light of the fableor’s comment, the husband’s asserting his courage will trigger the laughter of the audience, who, unlike the wife, knows his true nature. Returning from his first fight falsely proud of himself, the husband kicks his wife while she was holding his stirrup to help him dismount:

Qui ert molt forz de grant manière:  
 “Traiez vos t[ost],” fait-il, “arriere:  
 Quar ce sachiez, n’est mie droiz  
 Qu’a si bon chevalier touchoiz  
 Com ge sui, ne si alosé;  
 Il n’a si preuz ne si osé  
 En tot vostre lignaige au meins;  
 Ne sui mie matez ne veins,  
 Ainz ai los de chevalerie.”

[With great display of arrogance:  
 “Stand back!” he cried, “Hands off the boot!  
 Let it be known it isn’t right  
 For you to touch so great a knight  
 As I am—not with my renown,  
 For no such knight from Adam down  
 Adorns the family tree you vaunted.  
 I am not defeated, weak, or daunted.  
 I am the flower of chivalry!”] (119–125).

The comment about lineage is not only the husband's scorn of his wife's heritage but also the expression of the fableor's contempt for lineage and for the audience. Whether the fabliau was performed in front of an aristocratic audience or in front of aspiring common men, the criticism of the society is clear. While the fableor is sympathetic to the wife, who resists asking questions for fear of being beaten and waits until her suspicion is confirmed, the audience may wonder why it took her ten years to realize who her husband is.

The next time her husband goes out, she follows him disguised as a knight and, catching him hitting trees, says:

"Vostre escu porquoi laidangiez  
 Qui ne os avoit riens meffait?  
 Molt avez hui meü fol plait  
 Mal dahait ore qui vos prise,  
 Quant a lui avez guerre prise!"

["Why are you picking on that shield?  
 What has it ever done to you?  
 You've bit off more than you can chew.  
 Fie on whoever says it's fit  
 For you to wage a war on it!"] (203–206).

Introducing herself as Bérangier, the wife reclaims the narrative and starts mocking her husband. Then she humiliates him by asking him to fight or kiss her behind and finally invites her lover to their house. The husband comes home and says:

"Dame," fait-il isnelement,  
 "Vos me servez vileinement,  
 Qui home amenez çaienz  
 Vos le comparez, par mes denz!"  
 —"Taisiez vos en," fait el, "malvais!"

["Madam," he said, "it's plain to me  
 That you have done me injury,  
 Bringing a man to my abode.  
 You'll pay for this my girl. You've sowed  
 And you shall reap."—"Shut up, you"  
 She said, "And don't say anymore,"] (277–282).

Here the wife continues to exert her authority in words and action. That the husband thinks he can rebuke her irreverence reinforces his lack of understanding of his position. The fableor's last words, "A mol pastor chie lox laine" [when the shepherd's weak, the wolf shits wool], confirm the foolishness of the husband

for believing he could pretend to be a knight and a worthy husband and act as a warning to the aristocracy and maybe the audience. Understood at the level of the spouses, the last sentence could be a warning to husbands (shepherd) who are not strong enough to control their wives (wolves), who then eat up the marriage (implied sheep). However, as a paracommunicative utterance, it underscores the fableor's clear criticism of the aristocracy (shepherd) for letting these kind of men (wolves) enter its rank and steal their wives, the unnamed sheep. The analogy with eating underscores the connection between gluttony as a sin of the mouth and *derisio* as a sin of the tongue.

The metacommunicative alerts in *Les iiii Souhais Saint Martin* reinforce derision as the result of carelessness and impulsivity. St. Martin gives a husband four wishes to thank him for invoking his name every morning before work. After the husband tells his wife about this arrangement, she insists on getting one of the wishes, to which he agrees reluctantly, not trusting that, as a woman, she would make a good choice. In fact, she asks that he be covered with penises to satisfy her sexual needs. Foolishly, the husband uses the second wish to cover his wife with vaginas. When they see the monsters they have made of themselves, they both decide to use the third wish to get rid of all their penises and vaginas, thinking that they would have the last wish to get rich. Realizing their mistake, they decide to use the fourth wish to get back to the way they were originally and thus end up with nothing more than they started with.

When the husband comes home earlier to announce the good news, she calls him *vilain* and accuses him of laziness and gluttony:

Sa fame, qui chauce les braies,  
Li a dit: "Vilain, mal jor aies!  
Por qoi as-tu ja lessie oevre[?]  
Por le tens qui .i. poi se cuevre;  
Il n'ert vespres jusqu'à .ii. liues.  
Est-ce por encressier tes giues?  
Paor avez n'aiez forage;  
Onques n'amastes laborage.  
Vous fetes molt volentiers feste!  
A mal eur aiez vous beste,  
Quant vous n'en fetes vostre exploit!" <sup>43</sup>

[His wife, who wears the pants,  
tells him: "Villain, you had a bad day!  
Why have you left work already?  
Because it's getting a little cloudy:

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43 Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Fabliaux*, Tome Cinquième, CXXXIII, 201–207.



There are two leagues until vespers.  
 Is it to fatten your cheeks?  
 You're afraid you won't have food;  
 You have never liked work.  
 You willingly party!  
 To your misfortune, you beast,  
 When you don't do anything useful!"] (V-202)

The wife is introduced as the one who wears the pants; the husband as a good and humble man. She does not let him talk and disparages him for coming home early to eat and for his lack of work ethic. In return, the husband tells her nicely to stop “‘Tais toi, ma suer, ne te deshaite!’” [“Be quiet, my dear, don't get yourself sick!"]. The wife changes her tone when she finds out the reason of her husband's return. She now refers to him as “Sire” so she can get the first wish. Before finally letting her have the first wish, he again calls her “ma bele seur.” And even when he finds himself covered with penises, he remains courteous and says: “‘Suer,’ dist-il, ‘ci a lait souhait!’” [“Dear,” he said, “this is an ugly wish!"]. But the wife replies:

“Sire,” dist-ele, “je vous di bien  
 c'un seul vit ne me valoit rien.  
 Sempres ert mol comme pelice  
 Mes or sui je de vis molt riche!”

[“Sir,” she says, “I would gladly tell you  
 that one prick was worth nothing to me.  
 It is always soft like pelisse  
 But now I am very rich with pricks!"] (V-205).

In wishing for her husband to be covered in pricks, the wife has publicly exposed her husband's sexual inadequacy and made herself “wealthy” with penises. The word “*riche*” is used as a metacommunicative alert to point to the fact that, since she was concerned with her husband's not working, the audience would have expected her to wish for money instead.

In an act of revenge, the husband uses the second wish to get his wife covered in vaginas.

“Sire,” dist ele, “qu'as tu fait?  
 Por quoi m'as doné tel souhait?  
 — Je te dirai,” dis li bons hom:  
 “Je n'avoie preu en .i. con,  
 Puisque tant vit me doniez.  
 Bele suer, ne vois esmaiez,

Que jamès ne vendroiz par rue  
Que vous ne soiez bien connue.”

["Sir," she said. "What have you done?  
Why did you wish me this?"

—Let me tell you," said the good man:

"One cunt was not enough,  
Since you gave me so many pricks.

Dear one, don't worry,

Never will you go around

without being well known."] (V-206)

Now the husband, condescending to his wife, has returned the favor. The same way she exposed his impotence; he exposes her lust to the public eye. The husband's "je te dirai" ["let me tell you"] is a metacommunicative alert announcing the pun on "connue"—known but also "con-nue/vagina-ed." This remark is also the husband's first and only attempt to fight his wife with words.

Although their status in the marriage is now equal both in their physical appearance and their use of derision, they have lost two wishes. After that, the husband becomes his wife's mouthpiece and simply repeats what she tells him to say. When she says, "Souhaidiez que vous vit n'aiez / ne je con; ainsi le laiez" ["ask for no prick for you, no cunt for me; and let it go"], he does, and they end up with no genitals at all, thus proving the husband was right to tell his wife he was afraid she would not be sensible in her wishes. Although the husband is upset, he continues to let his wife tell him what to do:

"Sire," dist ele, "souhaidiez  
le quart souhait qu'encore avon  
Qu'aiez .i. vit & je .i. con;  
Si ert ausi comme devant,  
Et si n'avrons perdu noiant."

["Sir," she said, "make the wish  
for the fourth one we have left  
that you have one prick, and I, one cunt  
so it is the way it was before  
and we will not have lost anything."] (V-207)

The conclusion of the fabliau reinforces the stereotype that the men who believe their wives more than themselves are stupid, but also that there is nothing to gain in using derision. Equally eager in their foolishness, they use derision to attack each other, and they fail to heed Saint Martin's advice to choose their wishes carefully. As a result, they waste four wishes that could have changed their lives and bring "honte & anui" [shame and misery] upon themselves.

In both *De Berangier au lonc cul* and *Les iiiii Souhais Saint Martin*, the consequences of derision are serious. The lack of respect and affection not only degrades the idea of marriage, but also alters the integrity of the couples' bodies. This is even more evident in *Sir Hain et Dame Anieuse*, which portrays marriage as a war both spouses want to win. Sir Hain is not happy with the way his wife treats him and feels that he needs to regain control of the situation to show everyone who is wearing the pants. Pushed by his wife, he finally agrees to fight her in front of witnesses, and, as a symbol, his pants are hung on a line. The fight escalates until Dame Anieuse falls backward and loses. As the physical battle intensifies, so do the insults, yet the husband and wife continue to address each other with terms of endearment, which act as paracommunicative alerts to underscore derision.

The fableor's first line seems to take the side of the husband by saying: "Que cil qui a fame rubeste / Est garnis de mauvèse beste" [The one who has a bitter wife has a bad beast] (I-97). However the next three lines,

Sire Hains savoit bon mestier,  
 Quar il savoit bien rafetier  
 Les coteles et les mantiaus;<sup>44</sup>

[Sir Hain had a good profession,  
 He knew well how to mend  
 dresses and coats;] (I-97)

are the fableor's way to mention Sir Hain's inability to mend his own marriage. This is later confirmed in the text when the pants, the physical representation of the marriage, are torn in pieces. The fableor continues by listing what Dame Anieuse does that validates Sir Hain's anger. Dame Anieuse berates her husband by cooking the opposite of what he asks while calling him "biauz douz sire" ["dear sweet sir"] (98). When he asks for fish, he asks nicely, and when she comes back with the fish, he welcomes her. But the fish is rotten, and, when he tells her it stinks, she throws everything away. He then says to her,

"Diex!" fet Hains, "com tu me tiens cort!  
 A paines os-je dire mot!  
 Grant honte ai quant mon voisin m'ot,  
 Que tu me maines si vument."

["Lord!" said Hain, "such control!  
 I barely dare to say a word!

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44 Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Fabliaux*, Tome Premier, VI, 97–101.

I am ashamed when my neighbor sees  
How you treat me with contempt.”] (I-99)

To that, the wife simply answers, “‘Ba! Si en prenez vengeance,’ / Fet-ele, ‘se vous l’osez fère!’” [“Bah! seek revenge,” / she said, “if you dare!”] (I-100). The wife taunts her husband, convinced he will not do anything against her, but Sir Hain decides to fight her with the neighbors as witnesses.

As the fight proceeds, ridiculing and mocking give way to insults: Sire Hain calls Dame Anieuse “‘fame de put afère” [“bad woman”]. Dame Anieuse tells him she hates him: “‘Vilains,’ dist-ele, ‘je tehaz” [“Villain,” she says, “I hate you”] and later on “‘filz à putain, vilainz pullenz” [“son of a bitch, stinking villain”]. Finally they vow to kill each other. The insults get worse, and so does the violence. The destruction of their marriage is symbolized by the destruction of their bodies and the pants. The fight ends when Dame Anieuse trips and falls in a basket. When she is down, Sir Hain grabs and brings the torn pieces of the pants to the witnesses as a proof of his victory. Before being helped out of the basket, Dame Anieuse has to promise that she will be a better wife. She does, but only because she is scared to be beaten. At the end of the story, Sir Hain is vindicated and his authority asserted. The fableor concludes by saying that any husband with a wife like Dame Anieuse should not be a fool and endure it as long as Sir Hain did.

In *Les iiiii Souhais* and *Sir Hain et Dame Anieuse*, derision is the weapon women use to establish authority. Since the husbands cannot compete with words, they try to silence their wives. In *Les iiiii Souhais Saint Martin*, the husband’s only attempt results in the loss of the third wish, followed by his complete silence. Sir Hain wins the fistfight by chance and silences his wife. In line with the requirement that men should control their wives, the fableors remind the men of their duty, but at the same time imply that their ineptitude with language prevents them from creating marriages with respect and affection.

The opening lines of *Li Sohaiz Desvez* set a different tone:

Prodefame ert et il prodon;  
Mais tant vos os bien afichier  
Que li uns ot l’autre mout chier <sup>45</sup>

[She is an honest woman and he is an honest man;  
and I can assure you  
that they loved each other very much.] (V-184)

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45 Montaiglon and Raynaud, *Fabliaux*, Tome Cinquième, CXXXI, 184–191.

Here, the narrator stresses the couple's love for each other. When the husband comes home to his wife after a three month absence, again the narrator mentions how happy his wife is,

Ne cuidiez pas que il anuit  
 Sa fame, qant ele lo voit;  
 Tel joie con ele devoit  
 En a fait con de son seignor:  
 Ainz mais n'en ot joie graignor.

[Do not think she was irritated,  
 His wife, when she saw him;  
 Such joy as she owed him  
 she showed her husband:  
 she never had greater joy.] (V-184)

As expected, she feeds him, but when they go to bed, he falls asleep. The wife is angry, yet she also falls asleep and dreams she is at a market that sells penises. She chooses one and when she is about to slap the hand of the seller to seal the deal, she in fact slaps her husband on the cheek. He wakes up and asks her why she slapped him:

“Tot par amor et tot en pais,  
 Par la foi que devez mon cors.  
 Me dites que vos sambla lors,  
 Ne lo laissez por nule rien.”

[“Completely out of love and in peace,  
 Out of loyalty for me  
 Tell me what occurred then  
 Do not leave anything out.”] (V-189)

Since the husband's words are not threatening, the wife relates her dream “volantiers” [willingly], although she asks him after not to be angry at her. Curious, later the husband inquires how much his penis would cost, and she answers:

—“Sire, se je voie demain,  
 Qui de teus en aust plain cofre,  
 N'i yorvast qui i meist offer  
 Ne qui donast gote d'argent;  
 Mes li vit a la povre gent  
 Estoient el que uns toz seus  
 En vaudroit largement ces deus  
 Teus con il es; or eswardez

Que la ne fust ja regardez  
Ne demandez pres ne de loin.”

[—“Sir, may I not see tomorrow if I lie,  
Whoever would have a chest full of those  
would not find anybody to make an offer  
or give any money;  
Even the penises of poor people  
were such that one of those  
would be worth two of these  
As it is; now consider  
That nobody would have ever looked at it  
or asked about it, by any means.”] (V-190–191)

In the context of what the fabliau describes as deep affection and the husband’s willingness to listen to his wife, there is no derision in the wife’s comment except maybe for suggesting that even poor people have bigger penises than he does. This is reinforced when the husband replies jokingly,

—“Suer”, fait il, “de ce n’ai je soin.  
Mais pran cestui et lai toz caus  
Tant que tu puisses faire miaus.”

[“Sister,” he said, “it doesn’t matter.  
But take this one and leave the others  
Until you can do better!”] (V-191)

The husband and wife’s ability to communicate without derision shows a marriage based on respect and affection. The last words of the fableor confirm the tone of this fabliau. Rather than deriding the wife for her sexual appetite, he simply comments on the husband’s stupidity for having told the story.

Read or heard in the first degree, the fabliaux are funny and somewhat subversive. However, in the context of the socio-economic changes of twelfth- and thirteenth-century Northern France, the stories examined here suggest a different way for spouses to interact. Many of the fabliaux about marriage portray spouses who have contempt for each other and use derision to gain or keep the upper hand in the marriage. A sin associated with dissolution, derision triggers laughter and results in shaming not only the person toward whom the derision is directed, but also the speaker committing the sin. It is possible to think that our thirteenth-century bourgeois, who was laughing at his peers being shamed, was also indirectly being exposed by the fableor for participating in the deriding of others and laughing at husbands and wives mistreating each other against what the Church recommended. Maybe the unhappy wives of the bourgeoisie secretly dreamt of being fabliau wives, but in reality they probably quietly tolerated

their situation<sup>46</sup> or turned to their priest for advice on how to deal with their husbands.

During the sermons, the priests would use fabliau-like storylines in their exempla to wake up the audience by providing plausible examples. While the sermon dictates norms of behavior, it is also concerned with the fact that it is very difficult to follow what the Church prescribes as an ideal form of marriage. So sermons give practical advice to couples so they can deal with real life situations. Thomas of Chobham argues that women could positively influence their husbands' behavior ("[N]o priest is able to soften the heart of a man the way his wife can") and encourages husbands to show restraint in disciplining their wives: "for the [husband] should employ greater diligence in guarding this wife than in guarding any earthly possession, because nothing should be dearer to him than his wife."<sup>47</sup>

For the bourgeoisie in the midst of forming its own identity, the fabliaux address their concerns and anxieties as they adapt to a new economy and a different understanding of marriage. With an emphasis on derision as the marker of unsuccessful relationships between husbands and wives, these fabliaux, in a comical way, show that, when a woman does not agree to become a wife, when there is no affection but only derision and scorn, then there is no harmony, and these unions are rife with discord.

On a Sunday, our bourgeois would probably have gone to Church and listened to a sermon telling him how to be a good husband; then he may have been called upon by a fableor to listen to a story about his peers. Going home, he may have been thinking that he really did not want to be like the men in the fabliau, so he would do his best to follow the injunctions of the priest. He would not use derision with his wife but show her respect and affection and thus participate in the creation of the ethos of the new bourgeoisie.

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<sup>46</sup> Hannah Skoda, *Medieval Violence: Physical Brutality in Northern France, 1270–1330* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 193–231.

<sup>47</sup> Sharon Farmer, "Persuasive Voices: Clerical Images of Medieval Wives," *Speculum* 61.3 (July 1986): 517–543.





Ellen Lorraine Friedrich

## Poking [Fun] at [the Foibles of] the Flesh

### The Galician-Portuguese *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer*

Some decades ago in South Carolina, a colleague was rhapsodizing about her multi-month five-thousand-kilometer bicycle tour all over Europe. “Goodness!” I exclaimed. “Did you like Spain?” With a wave of her hand, she dismissed the country, mumbling something about Spain being too far away to visit—over the mountains, and that Africa begins at the Pyrenees.<sup>1</sup> While identifying the last statement as snarky might cast aspersions on Africa as too far removed from what she valued, as well as on Spain, dislocating the latter from Europe to another continent, her total and cavalier dismissal of a country that has what I consider an extremely rich culture (not to say all cultures are not important—no snark here!) stayed with me. A few years after that episode, I was taking leave of people where I worked—still in South Carolina—to accept employment in Portugal, and one person remarked, “Let’s see, so..., Portugal is the capital of Spain, right?” I remain unsure as to whether I understood the—I hope—unintentional jab in that question as applying to Portugal, a country downgraded to a city, or to Madrid, ignored as the capital of Spain. After arriving at my new job in Lisbon, the capital, of course, of Portugal, I often found my U.S. mail had been routed to Puerto Rico before arriving at its correct destination. Portugal, the “other” country of the Iberian Peninsula, had fared no better than Spain in the general consciousness and knowledge of some Americans, a people not particularly known for their familiarity with geography.<sup>2</sup>

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An earlier version of the present essay was given as “Poking [fun] at [the foibles of] the flesh: The Galician-Portuguese *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer*,” SEMA (Southeastern Medieval Association) Annual meeting, Little Rock, AR, October 13–16, 2015.

<sup>1</sup> I have heard “Africa begins at the Pyrenees” for as long as I can remember. In trying to ascertain the origin of the phrase, I have read that it was used by Cervantes (1547–1616); Napoléon (1769–1821); Domingos António de Sousa Coutinho, Count of Funchal (1760–1833); French churchman and ambassador Dominique Dufour de Pradt (1759–1837); Alexandre Dumas père (1802–1870); and Victor Hugo (1802–1885). William Z. Ripley expressed the notion of the Iberian Peninsula as African in *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), with the statement “Beyond the Pyrenees begins Africa” (p. 272). The phrase is also used in scholarly articles, e.g., Cathryn Bailey “‘Africa Begins at the Pyrenees’: Moral Outrage, Hypocrisy, and the Spanish Bullfight,” *Ethics and the Environment* 12.1 (Spring 2007): 23–37.

<sup>2</sup> Although the comment that some Americans may be geographically challenged may also seem snarky, the assertion is based in research. See, e.g., John Roach, “Young Americans Geo-

Admitted to the European Community (European Union) only in the 1980s, Spain and Portugal have at least occasionally found themselves excluded from general recognition or awareness by some of the Western world. Probably even less well known, the now autonomous region of Galiza (English and Spanish Galicia) in northwestern Spain, with recognition as a historic nationality,<sup>3</sup> stands in many ways as a link between the two countries of the Iberian Peninsula, sharing some of their history, yet distinct from both, and certainly from the rest of Europe. North of Portugal, and located in the extreme western part of Spain, Galicia lies at “the end of the earth,” as the name of its westernmost point, Fisterra (from Lat. *finis terrae*, the end of the earth; Finisterra in Spanish) suggests.<sup>4</sup>

Nevertheless, the region, named for a rare-in-Iberia Celtic tribe, has an illustrious history that includes its interior present-day capital of Santiago de Compostela as—since the ninth century—the peregrination destination *par excellence* for medieval Christians to the shrine of St. James. The Old Town, designated in 1985 as a UNESCO World Heritage Site, surrounds the cathedral that holds the purported remains of the apostle James. The Way of Saint James (El Camino de Santiago), a major pilgrimage route, each year brought countless medieval travelers from France and farther away through the Iberian peninsula to Santiago.<sup>5</sup> Along with the pilgrims came Provençal Occitan<sup>6</sup> *trobadors* [troubadours] who frequented the Castilian/Leonese and Aragonese courts that Portuguese no-

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graphically Illiterate, Survey Suggests” *National Geographic News*, May 2, 2006, accessed 17 August 2017, [http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/0502\\_060502\\_geography.html](http://news.nationalgeographic.com/news/2006/05/0502_060502_geography.html).

3 Galicia was established as an autonomous region or “comunidad” [community] on April 6, 1981. See, for example, *Encyclopædia Britannica*, s.v. “Galicia,” accessed 17 August 2017, <http://global.britannica.com/place/Galicia-region-Spain>, or the Spanish government (Gobierno de España) “Comunidades Autónomas” page, accessed 17 August 2017, [http://administracion.gob.es/pag\\_Home/espanaAdmon/comoSeOrganizaEstado/ComunidadesAutonomas.html](http://administracion.gob.es/pag_Home/espanaAdmon/comoSeOrganizaEstado/ComunidadesAutonomas.html).

4 James D’Emilio, as editor and translator of some essays in *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia: A Cultural Crossroads at the Edge of Europe* (Leiden: Brill, 2015), addresses the history and place of Galicia on the peninsula and in Europe, and presents some literary history of the region as well.

5 Discussed by, among others, Frede Jensen, in his Introduction to his *Medieval Galician-Portuguese Poetry: An Anthology* (New York: Garland, 1992), lxiii.

6 Literary scholars traditionally referred to the medieval literature written and the language spoken across what is now southern France and northeastern Spain, some parts of Italy, and other parts of the medieval Romance world choosing to write in it, as (Old) Provençal. More recently many scholars have preferred the terminology Occitan, in reference to the word for “yes,” *oc* (*òc*), in the language (*langue d’oc*) as opposed to the more northern *oil* (*langue d’oïl*) or modern *oui* of French. I am using Provençal Occitan (neither modifying the other, but both as used in scholarly research) to satisfy both literary, linguistic—and, to a certain extent—cultural, customs.

bility and entertainers also visited, thus exposing both Galicians and foreigners to each other's cultures and literatures.<sup>7</sup>

The language of Galicia, Galician (*galego*; *gallego* in Spanish), a Romance language now co-official with Spanish,<sup>8</sup> is more closely related to Portuguese with which it shares both its medieval origins and literature. Such was the stature of Galician-Portuguese<sup>9</sup> during the Middle Ages that both the Castilian Spanish King Alfonso X el Sabio (the Wise; 1221–1284), who wrote and oversaw the translation and writing of prose works in Castilian (Spanish),<sup>10</sup> and his grandson, the Portuguese King Dinis ([Denis/Diniz] 1261–1325), as well as others on both sides of the linguistic split, used the Galician-Portuguese language for their poetic compositions.

A corpus of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century *cantigas*, or songs, i.e., poetic works, written by the Iberian kings, nobles, and commoners is perhaps the most well-known body of literature in medieval Galician-Portuguese.<sup>11</sup> The *cantigas*, in this primary language for lyric poetry on the peninsula, can be divided into three main genres, the first two of them perhaps better known and having some similarities to troubadour love poetry: the *cantigas de amor* (or *d'amor*; songs of love [in the voice of a man]), and the *cantigas de amigo* (or *d'amigo*; songs about a

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7 The actual degree to which Provençal Occitan medieval literature may have influenced that of Galicia is debatable, although some similarity in genres and themes is undeniable. Jensen discusses some of the theories regarding the origins of Galician lyric in the Introduction to his *Medieval* (see footnote 6 above), xvii–cxx. See also William D. Paden, “On the Music of Galician-Portuguese Secular Lyric: Sources, Genres, Performance” in James D’Emilio, ed., *Culture and Society in Medieval Galicia*, 862–893.

8 See article 3 of the 1978 Spanish Constitution, accessed 17 August 2017: <http://www.congreso.es/consti/constitucion/indice/titulos/articulos.jsp?ini=1&fin=9&tipo=2>.

9 Sometime around the end of the fourteenth or the beginning of the fifteenth century, Galician-Portuguese began to differentiate into Galician and Portuguese. The two languages remain part of the same Western Iberian language family (as distinct from Spanish, for example), and are mutually intelligible.

10 See, for example, Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxxi–lxxii.

11 That said (that the *cantigas* comprise perhaps the most well-known body of literature in Galician-Portuguese), the *cantigas* as a whole have not been all that well-known in either Portugal or Galicia by the general population, perhaps because they belong to neither region/country exclusively, but to both, and the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* (explained above in the text) in particular have been a bit neglected until the end of the twentieth century and beginning of the twenty-first century, possibly because of their scabrous subject matter and the resulting belief that they were not worthy of consideration as literature. In general, the *cantigas* have been even less well known outside of the Iberian Peninsula. But see, for example, Benjamin Liu, *Medieval Joke Poetry: The Cantigas d'Escarnho e de Mal Dizer* (Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press, 2004).

[male] friend [in the voice of a woman]). The third group, the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* [songs of scorn and of “bad mouthing”/speaking ill of someone/malediction], includes compositions that excoriate the subject of the poem, often in a sexually suggestive or explicit—or even outrageous—manner. Although the *cantigas d'escarnho* [songs of scorn] do not normally name the object of their contempt, in contrast, the *cantigas de mal dizer* [songs of ill-speaking] usually do present the object of the bad-mouthing by name. In a special sub-set of either type of the last genre of *cantigas*—*d'escarnho* and *de mal dizer*—the poetic voice often directs the sarcastic criticisms of the text at the body, body parts, and/or bodily actions of the text's target (whether definitively identified or not), thus almost literally—and painfully—stripping off pieces of meat, as the etymology of the term *sarcasm* suggests (Gk *sarkazein*, literally “to strip off the flesh” [from *sarx* (genitive *sarkos*) “flesh,” properly “piece of meat”]),<sup>12</sup> to hold them up for examination and mockery.

In the ancient world, Plato, in his Socratic dialogs, insisted on the significance of the mixture of pleasure and pain found in both comedy and tragedy,<sup>13</sup> a combination also characteristic of the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer*, as well as of sarcasm. Sarcasm—from Late Latin *sarcasmus*, in turn from Late Greek *sarkasmos* “a sneer, jest, taunt, mockery,” from *sarkazein* “to speak bitterly, sneer”<sup>14</sup>—conveys the sting of the sneer, but provides a potential for pleasure in the appreciation of the jest or joke inherent in the communication. The *cantigas* in question similarly combine the bitterness of the attack with the sweet relief or respite of the comic cleverness contained in their verses. The cutting nature of the observations regarding the person and/or his or her body parts in the *cantigas* compositions is reminiscent of the eventual etymon of *sarcasmus*, the Proto Indo-European root word *\*twerk* “to cut,”<sup>15</sup> as well as of the sharp nature of snark, the topic of the present volume. Similarly, Oxford dictionaries highlight

12 Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “sarcasm,” accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=sarcasm>.

13 Plato, *The Collected Dialogs of Plato, including the Letters*, eds. Edith Hamilton, Huntington Cairns, trans. Lane Cooper (Pantheon Books, 1961), 1128, paragraph 47.

14 Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary, s.v. “sarcasm,” and Online Etymology Dictionary, s.v. “sarcasm,” accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.etymonline.com/index.php?term=sarcasm>.

15 Online Etymological Dictionary, s.v. “sarcasm.” The Proto Indo-European root word *\*twerk* is no relation to the 2013 phenomenon of the so-called “rump-shaking dance move” or form referred to as “twerking.” *Twerk* dates to 1820 as a twitching movement, also spelled *twirk* at Oxford Dictionaries: Language Matters, accessed 17 August 2017, <http://blog.oxforddictionaries.com/2013/08/what-is-the-origin-of-twerk/>.

the piercing, critical nature of snark,<sup>16</sup> and the Urban Dictionary emphasizes the stabbing, “biting, cruel humor or wit” used in snarky verbal attacks.<sup>17</sup> Dictionaries often offer explanations of snark as a snide or sarcastic remark,<sup>18</sup> a smart ass remark<sup>19</sup> or as even more crass behavior, and online bloggers debate the difference in snark, sarcasm, sass, snipe, and so on.<sup>20</sup> Others relate snark to wit, remarking that snark allows both the speaker and the target “to laugh at themselves [and] to be a willing participant in the ridiculousness of the moment,”<sup>21</sup> a characteristic that seems to hold true for at least some of the *cantigas* as well. Plato also related the ridiculous—or laughable—to pain and pleasure in performance. Significantly, the term “ridiculous” comes ultimately from Latin *ridiculum* “jest,” the noun derived from the infinitive *ridēre* “to laugh,” which is itself related to Sanskrit *vriḍate* “he is ashamed.”<sup>22</sup> The Sanskrit—perhaps importantly—expresses the personal pain, embarrassment, or shame that may be inherent for at least one participant in a ridiculous situation. Moreover, Aristotle, in his commentary on comedy, associates the ridiculous with the Ugly and with deformity, and mentions the comedy of invective,<sup>23</sup> predicting, in a sense, or at least outlining a classical precursor for the medieval Galician-Portuguese songs of scorn and of malediction and their attacks on outrageous bodies, body parts, and bodily actions.

One of the approximately forty *cantigas profanas* of King Alfonso X el Sabio [the Wise], “Non quer’eu donzela fea” [I don’t want an ugly damsel],<sup>24</sup> a *cantiga*

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16 Oxford Dictionaries: *Language Matters*, s.v. “snark,” accessed 17 August 2017, [http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american\\_english/snark](http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/us/definition/american_english/snark).

17 Urban Dictionary, s.v. “snark,” accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=snark>.

18 Oxford Dictionaries: *Language Matters*, s.v. “snark.” Some commentaries suggest a reductive elision of “snide remark” to “snark.”

19 Urban Dictionary, s.v. “snark.”

20 Susan Baker, “Smart Humor | sarcasm, snark, sassy, snipe,” *This Happy Mom*, accessed 17 August 2017, <http://thishappymom.com/31-days-of/writing-31-days-of/sassy-and-smart>.

21 Carl Lindvahl, “Witty vs. Snarky vs. Sarcastic: See the difference?” *Things You Wish You Knew Yesterday*, accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.thingsyouwishyouknewyesterday.com/blog/2015/1/6/witty-vs-snarky-vs-sarcastic-see-the-difference>.

22 Webster’s *Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary*, s.v. “ridiculous.”

23 Aristotle, *De poetica*, trans. Ingram Bywater, in *The Basic Works of Aristotle*, ed. Richard McKeon (New York: Random House, 1941), 1459.

24 Alfonso el Sabio, *Cantigas profanas*, ed. Juan Paredes Núñez (Madrid: Castalia, 2010), poem number 7. [Cancioneiro da Biblioteca Nacional (Lisbon, Portugal) 476]. The poem may be classed as a *cantiga d’escamho* because the criticism is sharp, yet the poet does not name the damsel. Due to the philological nature of the present study, as well as the fact that few of the poems have

*d'escarnho*, echoes Plato's and Aristotle's views about the ridiculous in performance, and Aristotle's association of the Ugly and deformity with invective. Alfonso's *cantiga* seems to embody both a sort of criticism and fear of the Ugly, of deformity, and of bodily acts, as well as the poet's anxious expression of the possibility of a close encounter of some kind—real or imagined—with an unappealing young woman. The assertion/exclamation “Non quer'eu donzela fea” begins every stanza, followed by the mention of an unattractive feature of the demoiselle, such as verse ten's “e velosa come can” [she is hairy as a dog], reiterating the girl's unsightliness, conveying her defective appearance, and hinting at the poet's horror at her hideousness. In each case, the shortcoming is followed by “que ant'a mia porta pea” [who farts (or pees or shits<sup>25</sup>) in front of my door], a line repeated as often (nine times) as the poet's insistence that he doesn't want an ugly *donzela*. The repeated verse about the maid farting in front of the poet's door exemplifies the crassness alluded to above in one explanation of snark. The indiscriminate—or perhaps very selective—flatulence of the maid, nevertheless suggests an ability to approach the king, or at least his abode, especially as the poet king uses the present tense when he talks about the girl's potential for (apparently repeated) elimination of gassiness at his front door. Of course the audience would recognize the ridiculousness of the situation, i.e., a king would likely have some choice in his selection of a young woman, and would probably not choose, or wind up with, an ugly, hairy lass who would fart in front of his door. So in this *cantiga*, Alfonso the Wise (!?), as an early snarker, sneers and jeers, and fears ugly women, yet he seems a willing participant in his own risible poem, where the joke, to some extent, is on him, since his target has the last laugh because she passes gas where he passes by, thus exemplifying the explanation above by one blogger of snark—that it allows both the speaker and the target (even if generalized in this case) “to laugh at themselves” and, I would argue, at each other, and “to be a willing participant in the ridiculousness of the moment.”<sup>26</sup>

Mary A. Grant, in *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable: The Greek Rhetoricians and Cicero*, discusses good-natured and ill-natured laughter—either or both of which may be present in the *cantigas*, such as the good-natured kind

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been translated into English, all English translations are mine unless otherwise indicated, and are intentionally literal.

25 Alternate interpretations of *pea* exist, but “fart” (Portuguese *peidar*; Galician-Portuguese \**pedar* [intervocalic -d- can disappear]) makes the most sense, in part because the poet later makes a reference to the damsel doing worse—which would probably be defecating—in front of his door.

26 See Lindvahl's “Witty vs. Snarky vs. Sarcastic: See the difference?”

in Alfonso's song above—and points out the pain resulting from the ill-natured sort.<sup>27</sup> The association of pain and pleasure (experienced in laughter, and/or in humor) is reflected in Rick McDonald's discussion of snark in an essay in this volume. McDonald identifies snark as a behavior directed at a target for "either antagonistic or ludic purposes."<sup>28</sup> I would suggest that, according to Plato and Aristotle regarding classical performance, and in the case of some *cantigas* as well, the specific kind of humor expressed by sarcasm (and perhaps especially snark) often has both antagonistic or painful, *and* ludic or humorous purposes. McDonald's evaluation of snark as art certainly describes the clever cutting up and cutting into the object of ridicule in each *cantiga d'escarnho e de mal dizer*.

Even today, the inhabitants of Galicia are noted for their particular sense of humor, one akin to snark. Contemporary Spanish poet Manuel Mantero remarks that fellow countryman Camilo José Cela, 1989 Nobel Prize Laureate for Literature—novelist, essayist, short story writer, and author of a multi-volume dictionary of sexual terms—attributed his sense of humor to his native Galicia,<sup>29</sup> a region recognized throughout its history for its humorists. Medieval Galician-Portuguese poets were no exception to the rule of regional witty writers. The lyric *cantigas de amor* or the *cantigas de amigo* may be better known, as noted above, but the body of thirteenth- and fourteenth-century Galician-Portuguese *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* includes songs that at times almost hysterically cut into or flay the subject of the poem, and/or his or her body parts and bodily activity (like that of King Alfonso X's farting damsel), often provoking a very uneasy humor. Similar to snark, Galician humor has its own name, *retranca*, and remains difficult—as is snark—to define. Galician film director Ángel de la Cruz compares Galician humor to Irish or British humor,<sup>30</sup> conceivably confirming the Celtic roots of Galicians, and certainly disassociating their sensibilities from Iberian or Romance senses of humor. *Retranca* can be an ability to speak with a double meaning, to criticize without seeming to, to poke at your victim and pull him or her close to you at the same time, to speak in a way so that

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27 Mary A. Grant, *The Ancient Rhetorical Theories of the Laughable: The Greek Rhetoricians and Cicero* (Madison: University of Wisconsin, 1924), 13.

28 Rick McDonald, "Encountering Snarks in Anglo-Saxon Translation: One Translator's Top 10 List," *Words that Tear the Flesh: Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literature and Cultures*, eds. Alan Baragona and Elizabeth L. Rambo (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2018), 21–40; here 23.

29 Manuel Mantero, "Camilo José Cela: The Rejection of the Ordinary," Carmen Tesser, trans., *The Georgia Review* 49.1 (Spring 1995): 246–250; here 248.

30 Martin Dale, contributor, quoting Ángel de la Cruz, "Galicia's burgeoning film market," *Variety* [US Edition], September 18, 2008, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://variety.com/2008/film/markets-festivals/galicia-s-burgeoning-film-market-1117992464/>.



the listener remains unsure about what he or she has heard, and so on.<sup>31</sup> Like the aggressive yet witty snark, *retranca* has a dual nature; “ambiguity lies at its core,” writes one blogger, calling it a “dark, corrosive and macabre humor,”<sup>32</sup> a trait that definitely describes many of the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer*. *Cantiga* editor Xosé Bieito Arias Freixedo highlights the equivocal character of the *cantigas*, noting that the poetry is based in ambiguity, in double meaning (“baseado na ambigüidade, no dobre sentido”).<sup>33</sup> Arias Freixedo<sup>34</sup> also stresses the oral nature of the *cantigas*, a genre meant to be performed with gestures and indeed the whole body.<sup>35</sup> Snark too, may—as often as not—occur orally and thus depend at least partially on tone and expression when enacted verbally. A 2009 book by *New Yorker* critic and wit David Denby entitled—what else?—*Snark*, traces the history of snark back to the insults occurring in ancient Athens’s drinking clubs.<sup>36</sup> Certainly many Greek and Roman examples of invec-

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31 Spanish dictionaries only offer the mechanical definitions for *retranca* (a kind of brake, a boom [nautical]). Galician dictionaries and blog sites offer more assistance in defining the typically popular, local, ironic form of speech. Particularly helpful are the essay by Burghard Baltrusch “Teoría e práctica sincrónica da retranca a partir do refraneiro e da literatura galega vangardista” *Anuario de estudos literarios galegos* (Vigo: Galaxia, 1998), 117–140, and the dissertation by Isabel Castro-Vázquez, “El lenguaje ecológico de Manuel Rivas: Retranca, Resiliencia, y Reexistencia” (2004), *Electronic Theses, Treatises, and Dissertations* Paper 4031, especially the chapter on *retranca* with sections on humor, *retranca*, examples, and the conclusion (36–48).

32 Colin Davies, “Thoughts from Galicia, Spain,” Colin Davies Blogspot, accessed August 17, 2017. <http://colindavies.blogspot.com/2007/07/today-bit-more-on-galician-humour.html>.

33 Xosé Bieito Arias Freixedo, ed., *Antoloxía de poesía obscena dos trobadores galego-portugueses* (Santiago de Compostela: Edicións Positivas, 1993), 14; see also 15.

34 The Spanish and the Portuguese usually use two surnames. In the case of the Spanish, whether Galician or not, names are alphabetized under the first surname, that of the father, with the mother’s name following. In the case of the Portuguese, names are alphabetized under the second surname, that of the father, although the mother’s surname comes first (in contrast to the Spanish where the father’s name comes first). That is part of the reason some bibliographical footnote entries may seem confusing. Another reason is that Spanish writers particularly often “go by” the more uncommon of the two surnames, e.g., the well-known Spanish poet and dramatist Federico García Lorca was referred to as “Lorca,” even though his name is always alphabetized under the G of “García.” In my references, of course, I respect the nationality and practice of the author and of bibliographers. For clarity, especially in the case of Spanish authors, including modern Galician ones, I may use both surnames, whereas in the case of Portuguese authors I will normally use the second surname, the father’s, under which the name is alphabetized. Medieval names are usually alphabetized by given names, and then any surnames or nicknames.

35 Arias Freixedo, *Introducción*, *Antoloxía*, 11.

36 David Denby, *Snark: A Polemic in Seven Fits (It’s Mean, It’s Personal, and It’s Ruining Our Conversation)* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2009).



tive speech survive. Although scholars may have a bit neglected studying the continuum of the use of verbal humor for snark-like attacks in the periods from the late Roman empire to the early middle ages,<sup>37</sup> the high middle ages provides a number of examples of the use of pointed wit to poke fun at popes and poets.<sup>38</sup> Medieval Provençal Occitan *trobadors* practiced a satirical genre known as the *sirventès* that began as a parody making use (*se sirven*) of another song's rhyme and/or melody<sup>39</sup> to offer opinions on or to criticize someone or something.<sup>40</sup> Often oozing what audiences might recognize today as snipe, snark, smarm, sass, sneer, scorn, snide, or other sarcastic remarks—even slander—the *sirventès* may have served as models for the *cantigas d'escarnho* and the *cantigas de mal dizer*, since the Provençal troubadours undoubtedly came into contact with at least some of the Galician-Portuguese *cantiga* composers in the courts of the northern Iberian peninsula and in those of medieval France and Occitania.<sup>41</sup> The essentially oral nature of the *sirventès* gives credence to the concept of a continuation (as Denby suggests) or re-establishment of oral invective since classical times, and, I would argue, to the possible inspiration or survival of the *sirventès* style in the *cantigas*.<sup>42</sup> Theories that the targets of the taunts were present at the performance of the poems have been set forth by Walter T. Pattison and others for the Provençal Occitan troubadours<sup>43</sup> and proposed for the *cantigas d'escarnho e de mal dizer* by Arias Freixedo, who situates the composi-

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37 Guy Halsall ed., *Humour, History and Politics in Late Antiquity and the Early Middle Ages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010) provides some examples of oral humor as invective.

38 See, for example, *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 2010).

39 Jensen asserts that the connection of the verb *servir* to the *sirventès* has not yet been “conclusively determined.” Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, x1vi.

40 For a discussion of the *sirventès* as a genre, see Martín de Riquer, *Los Trobadores: Historia Literaria y Textos* (Barcelona: Planeta, 1975), I: 53–59.

41 For thoughts on the possible associations and interactions of the Provençal Occitan troubadours and the Galician-Portuguese ones, see H. R. Lang, “The Relations of the Earliest Portuguese Lyric School with the Troubadours and Trouvères,” *Modern Language Notes* 10.4 (Apr. 1895): 104–116. By Occitania, I mean what is now the south of France where the troubadours lived and composed, and where the *langue d’oc* was (and still is by some) spoken; see footnote 6.

42 There does exist in Galician-Portuguese poetry a *sirventês* or *sirventês moral* genre that is more akin to the Provençal Occitan troubadours’ *sirventès* that criticized the church or politics, or even persons, but in the text here I am referring to a “*sirventès* style” of criticism in the *cantigas d’escarnho e mal dizer*.

43 See, for example, Walter T. Pattison, “The Background of Peire d’Alvernhe’s ‘Cantarai d’aquestz troubadors,’” *Modern Philology* 31 (1933): 19–20.

tions in the courts within the culture of non-official laughter (“cultura da risa, non oficial”) as an integral part of Bakhtin’s carnivalesque world “upside-down.”<sup>44</sup> Moreover, the sheer number of *cantigas* that address a person by name in the first verse and proceed to criticize and excoriate the person support Arias Freixedo’s contention that the person parodied should himself—or herself—laugh at the joke.<sup>45</sup> Arias Freixedo gives the example of Don Fernán Díaz (Fernan/Fernam/Fernão Díaz/Días/Dias),<sup>46</sup> a nobleman, who has seven satirical *cantigas* addressed to him.<sup>47</sup> While the seven songs express some fairly harsh *mal-dizer* (badmouthing), including attacks on Fernán’s “homosexuality,”<sup>48</sup> two of them mention the fact that the king had just named the noble to a high office, suggesting that the compositions may in fact represent—at least partly—good fun or jest, and indeed, that the recitation of the poems may have taken place in the presence of Fernán. In fact, two of the poems explicitly state that Fernán is with the poets. In one, Pero García Buralés, the author of fifty-three compositions, some of which demonstrate Provençal Occitan traits,<sup>49</sup> begins his compo-

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44 Arias Freixedo, Introducción, *Antoloxía*, 13.

45 There are, in fact, a number of *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* that target women, especially *soldadeiras*, women who “work,” shall we say, at court. By “work,” I mean, of course, as dancers or performers of some kind of acts (snark more or less intended). Ana Margarida Chora refers to such multi-talented and often marginalized women as “jogralesas” although she notes that revered medievalist Ramón Menéndez Pidal distinguishes between the two types of performing women (Ana Margarida Chora, “A jogralesas: mobilidade e marginalidade” in *Lors te metra en la voie... Mobilidade e Literatura na Idade Média – Mobilité et Littérature au Moyen Âge – Actas do Colóquio Internacional* [coord. Carlos F. Clamote Carreto], [Lisboa, Universidade Aberta, 2011], 37–45; esp. 39). In the present essay I focus more on men as objects of the jests in the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer*.

46 Although manuscripts may often contain the abbreviated form of the first name, with the first four letters, *Fern*, followed by a nasalizing symbol [a type of tilde] for the ending -n or -m, the name may be rendered a number of ways. I am choosing to use the form most commonly used by scholars writing about him. Similarly, for Díaz, I am using the form most scholars seem to prefer.

47 Arias Freixedo, Introducción, *Antoloxía*, 17. According to Josiah Blackmore (“The Poets of Sodom,” in *Queer Iberia: Sexualities, Cultures, and Crossings from the Middle Ages to the Renaissance*, eds. Josiah Blackmore and Gregory S. Hutcheson. [Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1999], 195–221), Fernán Díaz is the subject of nine *cantigas*, 207.

48 *Cantiga* editors refer to Fernán Díaz as [a] homosexual (e.g. Arias Freixedo, Introducción, and ed., *Antoloxía*, 17; 69 ff). I recognize the term as ahistorical so it occurs here in quotes. I tend to use the expression “homoerotic” in similar contexts except when reporting references by scholars who use “homosexual/ity.”

49 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, cii.

sition with “Fernán Díaz, este que and’aquí”<sup>50</sup> (Fernán Díaz, this guy who is [walking] around here), while Airas Pérez Voiturón, a Portuguese nobleman known at the Castilian court who wrote some thirteen compositions, all satirical,<sup>51</sup> states “Fernán Díaz, é aquí, como vistes”<sup>52</sup> [Fernán Díaz, is here, as you see]. The latter discusses Fernán’s impending marriage to a certain lady, implying that such a liaison will make it more difficult for him to have sexual relations with men; the former relates a trip Fernán made abroad and very subtly hints at his homoerotic behavior. Neither poem is particularly explicit.

The assertion that the object of scorn, snark, sarcasm, and ridicule be present at the occasion might remind a modern reader of nothing so much as the yearly Friars Club roast of a comedian or public figure by fellow comedians, singers and songwriters, other performers from the entertainment world, and big-name celebrities and politicians (in today’s world, often the same people). Authors of roast reviews in *People Weekly* describe the Friars Club as a “raucously secular...theatrical group” or a “highly profane showbiz club.”<sup>53</sup> A medieval gathering of jongleurs, troubadours, other writers, performers, clergy, noblemen, counts, and kings—whether Provençal Occitan or Galician-Portuguese<sup>54</sup>—for poetic competitions or other occasions would resemble the yearly New York roast of a public figure in the presence of funnymen and women, actors and actresses, Presidents Clinton or Obama, and other glitterati, thus carrying on the tradition that Denby proposes in his essay on snark, with the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* existing as one stage or phase in the sort of history of ritual insults and invective speech throughout the ages that he describes. The motto of the New York Friars Club, “We only roast the ones we love”<sup>55</sup> (in their presence of course), may

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50 Arias Freixedo groups the poems about Fernán Díaz together in his *Antoloxía*, 67–84. “Fernán Díaz, este que and’aquí” and its commentary is on pages 67–69. The poem is numbered 375 by Manuel Rodrigues Lapa, ed., *Cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer dos cancioneiros medievais galego-portugueses* (Lisboa: Edições João Sá da Costa, 1995), 1375 in the Biblioteca Nacional (abbreviated B), and 983 in the Vatican Library, abbreviated V.

51 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxx-lxxi.

52 Arias Freixedo, ed., *Antoloxía*, 70–72, poem and commentary. Lapa, ed., *Cantigas*, number 80; B 1479; V 1090.

53 McMuren, Kristin, “How do the friars roast Burt Reynolds? Blue on the inside, but tender is the bite,” *People Weekly* 1 June 1981: 101; Judy Kessler and James Seymour, “Friars and friends try to roast a not-so-lame duck named Johnny Carson,” *People Weekly* 21 May 1979: 36, respectively.

54 Jensen describes the social classes of the participants in the Galician-Portuguese—with reference to Provençal—poetic culture in his Introduction, *Medieval*, xxi-xxvi.

55 See the Friars Club heritage, accessed 17 August 2017, at <http://friarsclub.com/heritage/>. The statement regarding their first roast—in 1949 with Maurice Chevalier as guest of honor—that it was “obscene, unedited, outrageous and sidesplitting”—could well describe many of the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer*.

well also describe what occurred in medieval society in cases such as that of Fernán Díaz above, whom the king esteemed enough to be give an office of distinction, yet whose fellow courtiers “loved” enough to skewer joyfully in a celebratory roast.

While some distinctions traditionally exist between the *cantigas d’escarnho* [songs of scorn] and the *cantigas de mal dizer* [songs of badmouthing (or speaking ill)], the former expressed through “palavras encubertas que ajan dous entendimentos” [veiled (en/closed/covered) words that have two senses], and the latter conveyed more clearly—and often obscenely,<sup>56</sup>—both may exhibit traits of contemporary Galician snark-like *retranca*. *Cantiga* scholar Manuel Rodrigues Lapa, in his edition of the poems, quotes an explanation of the two types of compositions from the fourteenth-century *Poética fragmentária*, also known as the *Arte de Trovar*, found at the beginning of the Cancioneiro (Songbook) de Colocci-Brancuti (CB):

Cantigas d’escarneio son aquelas que os trobadores fazem, querendo dizer mal dalguen, en dizer-lho per palavras encubertas que ajan dous entendimentos,...; e estas palavras chaman os clerigos *equivocatio*....*Cantigas de mal dizer* son aquelas que fazem os trobadores descubertamente, e elas encerran palavras que queren dizer mal e non averan outro entendimento senon aquel que queren dizer chãmente.

[*Cantigas d’escarneio*/Songs of scorn are those that the troubadours make, wanting to speak badly of someone, by telling him it, through veiled words that have two meanings,...; and these words the clerics call *equivocation*....*Cantigas de mal dizer*/Songs of speaking ill are those that the troubadours make openly, and they include (enclose) words that mean to speak ill and won’t have another meaning than the one that they mean plainly.] (7)<sup>57</sup>

Scholars usually consider the *cantigas d’escarnho* as those that do *not* name their subject, and the *cantigas de mal dizer* as those that do,<sup>58</sup> but the distinction is not always made. In fact, some would argue that the two categories are not mutually exclusive and are sometimes combined in one *cantiga*.<sup>59</sup> The *Arte de Trovar* also mentions a sub-division of the *cantigas* called the *cantigas de risaoelha*

<sup>56</sup> Lapa, ed., *Cantigas*, 7, quotes from Enrico Molteni’s partial edition of *Canzoniere Colocci-Brancuti* (Halle, 1880), 3.

<sup>57</sup> Lapa, ed., *Cantigas*, quoting Molteni’s partial edition of *Canzoniere Colocci-Brancuti*, 3; 7.

<sup>58</sup> See, for example, *Cantigas de escárnio e mal-dizer*, ed. Carlos Miranda, copyright by M. Tavares [follows ed. of Lapa (ed., *Cantigas*)] (Sacavem: Polimpresso, 1987), 376.

<sup>59</sup> See also Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, xxxix-xliii, for a discussion of the “subtle division” between the *cantigas d’escarnho* and those of *mal dizer*, that he maintains is often the result of a “scholastic preoccupation with categorization,” a concern that has been more recently abandoned (xxxix).

["songs of laughter" or "risible songs"] perhaps reminiscent of the somewhat later Spanish *obras de burlas provocantes a risa* [works of jokes provoking laughter] published in Valencia in 1519,<sup>60</sup> commenting that the *cantigas* "[S]eeran d'escarnho ou de mal dizer, e chaman-lhes assi por que rien ende a vezes os omes, mais non son cousas en que sabedoria nen outro ben aja" [They (the *cantigas de risaoelha*) will be of scorn or of malediction, and they call them thusly because at times men laugh at them, but they aren't things in which there may be any wisdom or other good thing] (7).<sup>61</sup>

Laughing at something that holds no wisdom or other good thing might remind the modern reader of a snide remark or snark that serves little purpose but to poke or jab its target or victim with what recent critics—including Denby—have insisted amounts to biting, negative hostility and contempt.<sup>62</sup> Yet other contemporary writers insist on the cleverness of snark, the "biting, cruel humor or wit" as it is described in the Urban Dictionary, quoted above.<sup>63</sup>

In fact, in much clever writing, the reader may not initially perceive the quick wit and subtle references therein, as in the case of the ambiguous and often obscure *cantigas*, especially in the frequently difficult *cantigas d'escarnho e cantigas de mal dizer*. Such a reader may focus on the negative or distasteful aspects of the poem or other work, without probing the depths of the references. One example of a composition that may seem to provoke only awkward laughter—or uncomfortable squirming—after a quick perusal of it, "Comprar quer'eu, Fernan Furado, muu," a short two-stanza composition attributed to Fernan Gonçalves de Seavra,<sup>64</sup> a lord in the province of Zamora who apparently wrote mainly *cantigas de amor*,<sup>65</sup> sits squeamishly between the two categories of *cantigas*. At first glance, the opening line seems to address the object (the person named Fernan) of badmouthing like a proper *cantiga de mal dizer*, "To buy want I, Fernan Furado, a mule," but on the other hand, the name Fernan Furado, in appo-

60 *Cancionero de obras de burlas provocantes a risa*, ed. Frank Domínguez (Valencia: Albatros, 1978), 9.

61 Lapa, ed., *Cantigas (Arte de Trovar)*, 7.

62 See, for example, Richard Lea's "Does snark have a place in literary debate?" accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.theguardian.com/books/booksblog/2013/dec/17/snark-literary-debate-book-reviews>.

63 *Urban Dictionary*, s.v. "snark," accessed 17 August 2017, <http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=snark>.

64 Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, 49(-50). The author's name may also appear as Fernán Gonzalez [i.e., the surname with or without the accent] de Seabra. On websites, I find the poem attributed to Airas Veaz. See, for example, *Cantigas Medievais Galego-Portuguesas*, accessed 17 August 2017, <http://cantigas.fcsh.unl.pt/cantiga.asp?cdcant=437&tamanho=15>.

65 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxxviii.

sition to *eu* “I” may hint that the poet is speaking of himself with a nickname, “I, Fernan Furado, want to buy a mule,” and indeed, the author’s name is “Fernan,” a common name. On the third hand—but wait, aren’t these poems, especially the *d’escamho* ones, supposed to have only double meanings?—perhaps the poet wants to buy Fernan a mule, “I want to buy Fernan Furado a mule.” The lack of punctuation in the manuscripts means all interpretations are possible, at least in reading the first line.

On yet another hand, a derisive one, the apparent last name given, *Furado*, likely represents a type of scurrilous nickname, as explained below, rather than an actual surname, thus throwing the composition into the category of a *cantiga d’escamho*, since the words—names—are veiled. Nevertheless, the sub-division of the *cantigas* called the *cantigas de risaoelha* (“songs of laughter”/“risible songs”), mentioned above, a sort of middle ground that can be either of scorn or of malediction, may provide the best classification—if one is needed at all—because the poem is laughable, if uncomfortably, and one may argue that there is no wisdom nor other good thing in the poem, a bit like the worst snark:

Comprar quer’eu, Fernan Furado, muu  
que vi andar mui gordo no mercado;  
mais trage já o alvaraz ficado,  
Fernan Furado, no olho do cuu;  
e anda ben, pero que fer’ê d’unha  
e dize[n]-me que trage ua espulga,  
Fernan Furado, no olho do cuu.

E, Don Fernan Furado, daquel muu  
creede ben que era eu pagado,  
se non que ten o alvaraz ficado,  
Fernan Furado, no olho do cuu;  
é caçurro, e vejo que rabeja  
e ten espulga de carne sobeja,  
Fernan Furado, no olho do cuu. (Lapa 131; B 446)<sup>66</sup>

An initial—a bit safe—literal translation:

[I want to buy[,] Fernan Furado[,] a mule  
that I saw walking very plump in the market  
but it already had a tumor stuck,  
Fernan Furado, in the eye of its ass;  
and it walks well, but it’s hard of hoof

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<sup>66</sup> Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, also includes the poem and its commentary on pages 70–72.

and they tell me that it has a fibrous growth  
Fernan Furado, in the eye of its ass.

And, Don Fernan Furado, about that mule  
believe well that I would be paid,  
if not for its having the tumor stuck,  
Fernan Furado, in the eye of its ass;  
it's gross, and I see that it's moving its rear  
and it has fibrous flesh hanging out,  
Fernan Furado, of the eye of its ass].

By taking the middle ground and focusing on the clear humor of the *cantigas de risaoelha*, one does not have to dig any deeper into meaning, and one can imagine that poor, ridiculous mule with something nasty hanging out of its ass. But in spite of the fact that the author speaks in the first person, probably to a certain Fernan,<sup>67</sup> the placement of the latter's name in apposition to a mule, *muu*, a service animal of "unnatural" origin, a usually sterile hybrid of a mare and male donkey, incapable, like a eunuch, of generation, suggests that the character may be "unnatural" in some way. John Boswell, in *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality*, mentions the "Roman 'mule'" as a possible indecipherable homosexual slang term.<sup>68</sup> More specifically, Ida Nelson, writing on the late medieval French *sotties* (short, satirical plays) defines "mule" as a passive homosexual.<sup>69</sup> She lists a character called "Mulet de Palude" [Mule from the Swamp; Swamp Mule] appearing in one *sottie*. According to her, *palude* (swamp marsh, bog) signifies the anus.<sup>70</sup> Significantly, here, in the fourth line

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**67** One of the initial possibilities for the first verse, that the *eu/I* is in apposition to Fernan, i.e., "I, Fernan Furado, want to buy a mule" may be discarded based on the clear address to Fernan using his title "Don" in the similar first verse of the second stanza. The reading, nevertheless, remains a first possibility upon an original reading, until further verses are encountered. The same is true for "I want to buy Fernan Furado a mule" (although in Galician-Portuguese one would normally use a preposition with the name). All three readings are initially possible and confirm and highlight the ambiguity in the genre and in the poem, as well as the importance of expression to enlighten meaning in performance of the work.

**68** John Boswell, *Christianity, Social Tolerance, and Homosexuality* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1980), 253–254. Boswell also points out an expression used by an emperor who sought men "hung like mules," 80; footnote 90.

**69** Ida Nelson, *La Sottie sans souci: essai d'interprétation homosexuelle* (Paris: Honoré Champion, 1977), 145.

**70** Nelson, *La Sottie*, 146. See also J. N. Adams, "Culus, Clunes and their Synonyms in Latin" *Glotta* 59 (1981): 231–264; and *The Latin Sexual Vocabulary* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins UP, 1982) on anal metaphor, particularly agricultural and/or topographical (Adams, "Culus," esp. 246–247), as may be the case of the "swamp." It seems the swamp mule, in contemporary times, has either retained a sexual significance or (re-)acquired one. Baseball player Lenny Dyk-

of each stanza, the *cantiga* poet places the name of Fernan Furado in proximity to “asshole” (*olho do cuu*), and rhymes the *cuu* with *muu*, joining the Fernan/*muu*/(*olho do*) *cuu* in the listeners’ minds leading them to whatever associations they care to understand or to the conclusions to which they come.

Many of the poem’s words or expressions have two—or more—meanings, or hint at further associations, typical of the *cantigas d’escarnho*. But again, the sub-classification *cantigas de risaoelha* may be more appropriate, first, because it subsumes both the *cantiga d’escarnho*, and the *cantigas de mal dizer* categories, and second, because the poet here undoubtedly hopes that the audience will laugh—or at least snicker—at the cleverness of his snarky composition. Moreover, the listener or reader encounters no particular wisdom therein, other than perhaps sagacious language, or enlightenment as to the anal references the poet offers for examination.

The poem’s author, Fernan Gonçálvez de Seavra, perhaps the one mentioned by the Marqués de Santillana in his *Prohemio* and in the *Livros de Linhagens*,<sup>71</sup> was a contemporary of Afonso III, king of Portugal from 1248 to 1279. Originally from the Leonese region, Fernan Gonçálvez wrote in the third quarter of the thirteenth century.<sup>72</sup> One of his editors contends that the poet “was able to write...in such a way that nobody could understand.”<sup>73</sup> The composition “Comprár quer’-eu, Fernan Furado, muu” sets out numerous philological challenges, and the same editor argues that the linguistic importance of the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* “can hardly be overrated,” and that these poems “have preserved for posterity a whole segment of the medieval Portuguese vocabulary that goes undocumented in the love genres,”<sup>74</sup> hence counteracting any claim that such snarky language is without value.

At first impression, the poem seems to represent the author/narrator’s comment to one Fernan Furado about the speaker’s intention to buy a nice fat mule he saw in the market.<sup>75</sup> The setting recalls Bakhtin’s concept of billingsgate or

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stra discussed fellow player Darryl Strawberry’s genitals: “That guy was hung like a swamp mule. He had a hammer from hell. It was traumatizing,” he said. See Gabrielle Fonrouge, “Lenny Dykstra was traumatized by Darryl Strawberry’s Genitals” *New York Post*, June 30, 2016, accessed 19 August, 2017, <http://nypost.com/2016/06/30/lenny-dykstra-was-traumatized-by-darryl-strawberrys-genitals/>

71 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxxviii

72 Giulia Lanciani, and Giuseppi Tavani, *Dicionário da literatura medieval galega e portuguesa* (Lisbon: Caminho, 1993), 259–260.

73 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxxviii.

74 Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, xxxix.

75 Also noticed by Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, 50.



marketplace style of expression,<sup>76</sup> and indeed, similar to the evocation of the parts below the waist such as the arse that Bakhtin points out exists in the carnivalesque,<sup>77</sup> the poet quickly provides references to the rear reminiscent of the focus on the lower body parts, the genitals, the belly, and the buttocks in Bakhtin's world upside down.<sup>78</sup>

The apparent drawback to the market transaction is the detail of the ugly tumor hanging out of the animal's anus. Comprehension of the *cantiga* becomes quickly complicated by the realization that all is not always as it seems, and that ambiguities, as in the typically Galician *retranca*, play a role in the performance of the poem, and such a potential may contribute to a changing perception of the verses. Nevertheless, *no olho do cuu* amounts to a rather obvious sexual expression, and the reader understands it literally as "in the [no] eye [olho, Latin *oculus*] of the [do] ass/rear end/buttocks [cuu, from Latin *culus*]," i.e., in the eye [hole] of the ass [of the mule], i.e., in the asshole [of the mule].

The quite clear reference to the asshole—*olho do cuu*—reminds us to treat—at least linguistically—the tumor hanging out of it: *o alvaraz ficado*. *Alvaraz* refers to a type of white leprosy or to pustules.<sup>79</sup> As Arias Freixedo reveals in the notes accompanying the poem in his anthology: "O termo *ficado* lembra o *ficus* latino, que era unha excrecencia anal, en forma de figo, frecuente entre os homosexuais pasivos" [The term *ficado* recalls Latin *ficus* (which means "fig"), which was an anal outgrowth, in the form of a fig, frequent among passive homosexuals].<sup>80</sup> J. N. Adams, writing on sexual metaphor and euphemism in Latin and the Romance languages, takes the analogy further, maintaining that, in addition to referring to an anal sore caused by damage from sexual penetration, *ficus* could function as an agricultural metaphor referring to the anus itself.<sup>81</sup> Moreover, *fi-*

76 Bakhtin, "Introduction," *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helen Iswolsky (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1984), 1–58; esp. 6–11.

77 Bakhtin, "Introduction," *Rabelais*, 11.

78 Bakhtin, "Introduction," *Rabelais*, 21.

79 I do not think we can ignore the possibility that there is another pun or double—or triple—meaning intended as *alvaraz* exists as an Iberian (Spanish, Portuguese, Galician) surname, *Álvaraz*, a less common spelling of *Álvarez* or *Álvaras*; also *Álveraz* and *Álveres*, possibly a patronymic, i.e., the son of *Álvaro*, or even, if derived from the Arabic *al-faris* "knight" [*faras*, horse] as is the Spanish and Galician military or court rank *alfériz*, or Portuguese *alferes*, thus implying in the third and fourth lines, "...o alvaraz ficado/Fernan Furado, no olho do cou" that instead of a tumor hanging out of the mule's rear, there may be a man [or some part of him]—identified by his surname or by his title—stuck in the (mule's) asshole. A full examination of all the poem's textual possibilities will have to wait for another occasion.

80 Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, 50.

81 J. N. Adams "Culus, Clunes and their Synonyms in Latin" *Glotta* 59 (1981): 231–264; 246–247.

*cado*, the adjectival past participle of the infinitive *ficar*, whose original sense (its modern Portuguese meaning is “to stay or remain”), means “to nail,”<sup>82</sup> reinforces the suggestion of an act of anal penetration<sup>83</sup>—past, or yet to come.

The innuendo of insertion continues since, in fact, Fernan’s surname Furado presents a pun. The name Fernan Furado appears six times in fourteen verses. Obviously a jest or a jab, a nickname rather than a last name, *F/furado*, the descriptive past participle of the infinitive *furar* “to bore, pierce, drill, perforate, puncture, prick, stick, penetrate, jab, thrust,”<sup>84</sup> insinuates in its oft-repeated poetic context that anal penetration has been perpetrated on Fernan, that he is or has been “pierced, drilled, perforated,” etc. As Arias Freixedo points out, Fernan offers his anus, “honoring his last name” [*facendo honor ó seu apelido*], *Furado*.<sup>85</sup> Hence Fernan serves as the mule, the “passive homosexual.”

Fernan Furado is not the only Galician character who exhibits a descriptive sobriquet. Spanish poet Mantero indicates in his article on Cela that the Nobel Prize winning Galician writer uses extraordinary “allegorical names based upon ridiculous physical or moral features” of his characters. Mantero offers examples such as Cela’s “Clavelito el Próstata”<sup>86</sup> [Pinky (“Little Nail”) the Prostate] and “Blasito Culopollo” [Little Blaise Chickenass].<sup>87</sup> Seven hundred years earlier, Cela’s compatriots—the Galician-Portuguese troubadours—name the objects of their ridicule or amusement in a similar way. They gave their court society, for example, Bernal Fendudo “Bernie Cracked-Ass,” Fernando Escalho “Ferdinand

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<sup>82</sup> Joan Coromines, *Breve diccionario etimológico de la lengua castellana* 3rd ed. (Madrid: Gredos, 1987), 272. The Latin etymon of *ficar* is *figicare/figere* “to affix.”

<sup>83</sup> Compare Spanish *clavar* [Portuguese *cravar* “to drive in/to penetrate] “to nail,” from *clavo*, which means “nail” but, by extension, “phallus,” giving the verb its double entendre. For *clavo* “nail/phallus,” see Louise O. Vasvári’s article, “‘Chica cosa es dos nuezes:’ Lost Sexual Humor in the *Libro del Arcipreste*,” *Revista de estudios hispánicos* 24.1 (1990): 1–22; 3. See also Charles Jernigan, “The Song of Nail and Uncle: Arnaut Daniel’s Sestina ‘Lo ferm voler q’el cor m’intra’” *Studies in Philology* 71.2 (Apr. 1974): 127–151.

<sup>84</sup> See Portuguese and/or Portuguese-English dictionaries. These senses of the word come from my knowledge.

<sup>85</sup> Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, 50.

<sup>86</sup> “Clavelito,” in addition to evoking the pink of the (red) carnation *clavel* flower, hints at the *clavo* “nail/phallus” (as established in the text and footnote 83 above) which could potentially penetrate as far as the prostate. The word is also reminiscent of *clave* “key,” whether the hard physical one that one puts into a slot, or a metaphorical one, either one of which could serve as a metaphor for the penis/phallus.

<sup>87</sup> Mantero, “Camilo José Cela: The Rejection...,” 249.

Snooky,”<sup>88</sup> Pero Tinhoso “Peter Fungus,” Jogral Saco “Jongleur Balls,” and, of course, our very own Fernan Furado “Fuckedover Ferdy.”<sup>89</sup>

Elsa Gonçalves affirms the “malicious mistaking” of Fernan Furado for the mule, itself metaphorically equivalent, as noted, to a passive homosexual. Thus Fernan Furado, by logic—if A [Fernan] = B [mule], and B [mule] = C [passive homosexual], then A [Fernan] = C [passive homosexual]—equals the passive male in a homoerotic relationship.<sup>90</sup> At least one set of scholars maintains that a reference to “fat,” as in the expression “mui gordo” describing the mule, associates physical deformation with homosexuality as the antithesis of the slender, supposedly sexless, or possibly heterosexual, spiritual man.<sup>91</sup> Lapa asserts that the allusions to sickness and its site refer both to the mule and to Fernan, effectively accusing the man of having “venereal diseases [that] result from homosexual practices.”<sup>92</sup> The homosexual practices alluded to in the *cantiga* imply anal sex, of course, and other references to the rear and to rear entry exist in the poem.

Two lines especially, numbers five and twelve, have produced some disagreement as to their interpretation.<sup>93</sup> The first of these two fifth lines in each stanza (“e anda ben, pero que fer’ é d’unha”), presents some particular linguistic difficulties. In the expression “fer’ é d’unha,” *fer* is the third person singular of

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**88** *Escalho*, or *escalo*, is probably a dogfish (Spanish *escualo* or *escuálido*) or some other big-tailed fish (see Spanish and Portuguese dictionaries), and is also called, according to the *Dicionário da língua portuguesa*, “bordalo, robalhino [a little snook], pica [“pike” or “penis”], ruivaco, etc.” *Dicionário da língua portuguesa*, eds. J. Almeida Costa and A. Sampaio e Melo (Porto: Porto Editora, 1994), 723. I choose “Snooky” for its relation to the fish snook, for the possibility of hinting at the phallic metaphor, and for the allusion to “nooky,” American slang for “pussy,” or the female pudenda, appropriate to the male pathic. Eels, fish, and even shellfish may commonly serve as phallic metaphors. See, for example, Jean-Louis and Gérard Gréverand, *Les portugaises ensablées* (Paris: Ducuolot, 1987), 88–90.

**89** The characters named above in the text appear in poems numbered by Lapa (ed., *Cantigas*) as 188; 340, 378, 379, 410; 404; 132, 133; respectively; and of course the poem here quoted, 131.

**90** Elsa Gonçalves seems to use the term *pederasta* to mean a “homosexual” or a “passive homosexual” since she refers to a “puto” (a term most scholars recognize as equivalent to “boy prostitute”) in *Poesia de Rei: três notas dionisinas* (Lisbon: Edições Cosmos, 1991), 38.

**91** Berta Martinha C. Pimenta, Leonardo Parnes, and Luis Filipe Llach Kruz, “Dois aspectos da sátira nos cancioneiros galaico-portugueses: ‘sodomíticos’ e ‘carnudos’” *Revista da Faculdade de Letras* 24th series (1978): 113–128; 119.

**92** Lapa, ed., *Cantigas*, 99. Pimenta et al., in “Dois aspectos,” also maintain that incurable illness alludes to homosexuals (119–120). Blackmore comments the case of Pero Tinhoso (“Peter Fungus,” a character mentioned in the text above, also suffering from tumors) in “The Poets of Sodom,” *Queer Iberia*, 215.

**93** See, for example, Arias Freixedo, ed. *Antoloxía*, 49–50.

either *ferir* “to wound” or *ferrar* “to shoe” (horseshoe) or “to pierce.” Any one of them reinforces the intimation of (sexual) aggression or penetration. The noun *unha* may mean “nail,” “claw [or “hoof”]” or “rake,” all of which may serve as phallic metaphors,<sup>94</sup> essentially providing a reading something along the lines of “he’s hit (or pierced) with the long hard thing.” The twelfth line (“é caçorro, e vejo que rabeja”), while still problematic, offers one more instance of a reference to the rear end. The verb *rabeja(r)*, formed with the suffix *-eja*, connotes frequency.<sup>95</sup> Such verbs are formed on nouns, in this case on *rabo*, from Latin *rapum* “turnip,” furnishing another example of an anal agricultural metaphor for rear end or “tail,” the fourth category in Adams’s list of metaphors for the buttocks, anus, and rectum.<sup>96</sup> After all, if a fig, why not a turnip?

Although originally referring to the “tail” of the turnip, that is, the lower part of the root narrowing from the bulbous top, Spanish *rabo* and Portuguese *rabo* both refer to the posterior parts of many animals, including humans, and provide literally hundreds of derivatives in Portuguese and numerous related forms in Spanish as well.<sup>97</sup> *Rabo* has become probably the principle popular term for the posterior in Portuguese, and slang dictionaries attest to the popularity of *rabo* and its reflexes in anal metaphor in Portuguese, and to the fact that it is used in reference to homosexuals.<sup>98</sup> Nevertheless, in the cantiga about Fernan Furado, *rabeja* references the rear rather than the anus itself, but only to call attention to the availability of its *olho do cuu*. Thus we learn that Fernan, or the mule that stands for him, “wiggles it”—“works it” or “twerks it”—provocatively advertising its/Fernan’s interest in anal sex, as Arias Freixedo determines.<sup>99</sup>

A tentative re-translation of the problematic poem playing with the possible puns calls attention, rather than to an animal, to a character, like those of Cela, with a supremely suggestive surname, one who is, to employ Mantero’s phrase in

94 See, for example, Vasvári, “Chica cosa....”

95 See *Dicionário*, eds. Costa and Sampaio e Melo, 646.

96 Adams “*Culus, Clunes...*,” 245–249. I note that *rabo* can also signify the penis (Real Academia Española, “rabo,” *Diccionario de la lengua española*, Edición del Tricentenario, accessed August 17, 2017, <http://dle.rae.es/?id=UzET9pd>).

97 See regular (<http://dle.rae.es/?id=UzET9pd> [see previous footnote], accessed 17 August 2017) and slang dictionaries as in footnote 98 below.

98 See, for example, the slang dictionaries of Mario Souto Maior, *Dicionário do palavrão e termos afins* (Rio de Janeiro: Editora Record, 1988); of Eduardo Nobre, *Dicionário de calão* (Lisboa: Círculo de Leitores, 1985); and of Neves B. Pinto, *Dicionário do palavrão e afins* (Lisboa: Bicho da Noite, 1993).

99 Arias Freixedo, ed., *Antoloxía*, 50.

reference to the Galician Cela, “associated with sex in its least conventional [at least for some] aspect.”<sup>100</sup>

I want to buy[,] Fernan Pierced[,] a mule  
that I saw walking very plump in the market,  
but it/you already had a tumor stuck in [,]  
Fernan Punctured in the asshole;  
and he’s baaad, but he’s wild about a prick,  
and they tell me that he’s got a spur,  
Fernan Jabbed in the asshole.

And, Don Fernan Pierced by that mule  
believe well that I would be pleased,  
if not for his/your having the tumor nailed[,]  
Fernan Drilled in the asshole;  
He’s/You’re a real prick and I see that it wriggles  
and has a piece of meat hanging out,  
Fernan Fuckt in the butt.

One notices that the varying insertion of the commas, or their omission—punctuation marks being non-existent, of course, in manuscripts—changes the meaning of the line, and of the poem. Those virgules, smaller versions of the *virga*, the rod of authority, the *verga*, phallic symbol par excellence,<sup>101</sup> when placed behind the surname Furado, insinuate the nature of the man, but separate him partially from mention of the asshole, and from the mule. When an editor sticks one in behind Fernan, they remind the audience that the fellow has been “furado no olho do cuu”—that something has penetrated the hole of his ass, that of the “mule,” or rather, that of the man likely interested in homoerotic activities. Finally, when the commas are entirely absent, as in the medieval manuscripts, we are struck by the ambiguities and possibilities of interpretation of the poem in performance, in addition to the double import of the past participle used as an adjective that still carries the penetrating force of the verb. Tone—and expression—make the meaning.

Bringing up the rear—so to speak—on anal metaphor, ambiguities, snark, dark and painful humor, *retranca*, and other important subjects, there exists a series of references in the form of double entendres that signify either the female

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**100** Mantero, Camilo José Cela: “The rejection...,” 249.

**101** Adams, *The Latin*, 14; *Le (Nouveau) Petit Robert* (Paris: Dictionnaires Le Robert, 1993, 1996) notes that French *verge* (from Latin *virga*), since the thirteenth century, designates the “organe de la copulation,” 2372.

pudenda and/or the posterior part<sup>102</sup> of the ambiguously gendered object of the attentions of one Sir Beeito. The wordplay occurs in a petit poem<sup>103</sup> by one of the most prolific Galician-Portuguese troubadours, who has eighty-one poems attributed to him—second only to King Dinis of Portugal—Joan Airas de Santiago:<sup>104</sup>

Don Beeito, ome duro  
foi beijar pelo obscuro  
a mia senhor.

Come ome aventurado,  
foi beijar pelo furado  
a mia senhor

Vedes que gran desventura:  
beijou pela fendedura  
a mia senhor.

Vedes que moi grand'achaco  
foi beijar polo buraco  
a mia senhor! (Lapa 183)

[Don Beeito, a hard man  
went to kiss secretly/in the dark [place]  
(of) my lady.

Like a daring man,  
he went to kiss [in] the slit  
of my master.

You see what great misfortune:  
he kissed [in] the split  
of my mistress.

You see what very great sickness  
it was to kiss [in] the hole  
of my lord.]

*Don Beeito, ome duro*, Lord or Sir Benito (Blessed), a hard man, may have a hard-on. The use of the term *oscuro* (obscure, dark) reminds the reader of the veiled words of the *cantigas d'escarnho* as well as of the dark humor in snark and in *retranca*. *Pelo oscuro* (in the dark—or in the dark place) suggests not just the se-

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**102** For the interchangeability/conflation of *cunus/culus* [cunt/butt] see Miranda, ed., *Cantigas*, notes on Lapa's poem number 314; as well as Adams, "*Culus, Chunes....*"

**103** B 1464; V 1074; also in Lapa (ed., *Cantigas*) number 183; and Arias Freixedo, ed., *Antoloxía*, 136–137.

**104** Jensen, Introduction, *Medieval*, lxxxii.

crecy of Don Beeito's actions, but also the hidden anus [or pudenda<sup>105</sup>], as well as the hidden meanings in the *cantigas*. Don Beeito does not hesitate to go to the dark place, the ass(hole) or the genital area of the object of his desire (whether as an erotic act or to curry favor, i.e., ass-kissing), or to carry out the potentially dangerous kissing of the erotic parts of someone else's lord or lady. The poet's "a mia senhor," an expression that usually occurs in the *cantigas d'amor*, follows the Provençal Occitan troubadour conventions of the *cansó* (a love poem), first, of having the discretion not to name one's lover, and second, of prudently using the masculine form *midons*—although the possessive is feminine (*a mia [senhor]*)—to address the lady. Nevertheless, in a *cantiga d'escarnho* the possibility might remain, with the masculine form *senhor* (rather than the feminine *senhora*), that the poet is hinting at service to a lord rather than to a lady.

Regardless of the fact that the *pelo oscuro* of the first stanza may suggest secrecy, the *furado*, as we have seen in the case of Fernan, as well as the *fendedura* and the *buraco* of the remaining stanzas, leave no doubt as to the nature of the place Don Beeito seeks and kisses. *Furado* and *buraco* both evoke the anus as "hole" idea explained by Pierre Guiraud and others, while *fendedura* (*fender* "to split") derives from one of the most common conceptions of the buttocks/anus as [having been/being a] "split."<sup>106</sup> As a result, the poet encourages his audience to see (*Vedes*) the misfortune (*desventura*) and illness (*achaco*) his kiss (*beijar* [to kiss]; *beijou* [he kissed]) has brought the nobleman.

The mention of malady related to the anus recalls the association of venereal diseases, as noted above in the text and in footnote 92, with men who engage in same-sex activity—if indeed Don Beeito consorts with a man—and forms of *beijar* may impute a more sexual meaning to such actions than a mere kiss, as in the Old Provençal Occitan and Old French equivalents of *beijar* as "to have coitus," in the more delicate language of the corresponding literature.<sup>107</sup>

Thus *pelo oscuro*, in the dark place,<sup>108</sup> functions as a euphemism for the no longer hidden anus, revealed as the slit, the crack, the hole of Fernan Furado

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**105** See footnote 102.

**106** For "hole" see Pierre Guiraud, *Dictionnaire historique, stylistique, rhétorique, étymologique de la littérature érotique*, rpt. as *Dictionnaire érotique* (Paris: Payot, 1978; rpt. 1993), 43–44, and, for example, Jonathan Green, *Slang through the Ages* (Chicago: NTC, 1993, 1997), 68; for "split" see Guiraud, *Dictionnaire*, 43–44. The female genitals may also be considered "split."

**107** See, for example, Pierre Bec, *Burlesque et obscénité chez les troubadours* (Paris: Stock, 1984), 234; and Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Dictionnaire de l'ancien français* (Paris: Payot & Rivages, 1993), 59.

**108** Guiraud, *Dictionnaire*, discusses the excremental qualities of the anus and the colors associated with it, and provides examples of metaphors at 42–44. More modern illustrations of the "darkness"—and perhaps the sweet appeal—of the anus come from cadets in the Spring 2001

and of the masculine/feminine “*mia senhor*,” brought to light in medieval Galician-Portuguese poetry. In addition, the darkness reminds the audience that not all humor is good and bright, but sometimes light and dark, like snark and *re-tranca*. The darkness recalls, too, the anus, often hidden or ignored as an object of erotic interest in society and in literature, much as the Galician-Portuguese *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* have been relatively or totally unknown to the rest of the world outside of the Iberian peninsula—and sometimes within also.<sup>109</sup> By tearing away the fleshy covering of the top layer of “nice” society to expose its deeper, perhaps darker interests and foibles, in the case of the *cantigas*, a careful reader can undertake a study of the use of sarcasm and snark as vehicles for understanding another part of the puzzle of human expression that remains sometimes distant in space and time.

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linguistics class of Professor Christopher R. McRae at the Citadel, The Military College of South Carolina: “dark star,” “chocolate starfish.” I thank Alan Baragona for reminding me of another term I have heard, “riding the Hershey [large chocolate manufacturer in the United States] highway,” one he heard in the late 1980s, when he brought Allen Ginsberg, the twentieth-century American poet, to the Virginia Military Institute, where the cadets there referred to a homosexual as someone who rode “the Hershey highway.”

**109** See footnote 11 regarding the relative neglect of the *cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* as literature.



Albrecht Classen

# Sarcasm in Medieval German and Old Norse Literature

## From the *Hildebrandslied* to *Fortunatus*: The Dark Side of Human Behavior

We all might recognize what sarcasm means when we encounter it, but it might be difficult to define it specifically within the broad spectrum of comedy and laughter. Sarcasm is closely related to cynicism, which breaks through when, for instance, an inferior individual voices deep disrespect for a superior who is, according to the opinion of the former, not worth that rank or fails to live up to the expectations (social, political, religious, ethical, moral, intellectual, etc.). The political inferior person cannot defy the opponent in practical terms, but knows how to resort to this form of black humor, or a type of swipe directed at the opponent, who thus becomes ridiculous. Niklaus Largier identifies sarcasm as bitter laughter, or specifically, mockery, out of wrath and anger. For him, both cynicism and sarcasm question the traditional world order and undermine authority. A cynic and/or sarcastic person simply denies his/her empathy to another person who is not worthy of one's support.<sup>1</sup>

The sarcastic speaker has no pity and almost intends to hurt and humiliate the opponent, as Friedrich Nietzsche (1844–1900) already observed.<sup>2</sup> A superior individual would not necessarily need to resort to sarcasm when commenting on an inferior's behavior or words since the power differential grants him/her an advantage already. But sarcasm can be observed in many different personal relationships, that is, also between equals who are involved in a conflict with each other and try to reestablish the hierarchy. When we come across examples of sarcasm, we regularly enter into a considerably diversified approach to humor,

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1 Niklaus Largier, "Zynismus," *Reallexikon der deutschen Literaturgeschichte*, ed. Jan-Dirk Müller, vol. III (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 901–03.

2 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Menschliches Allzumenschliches*. Sämtliche Werke, 3 (Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner, 1964), I, 372: "Die Gewöhnung an Ironie ebenso wie die an Sarkasmus, verdirbt übrigens den Charakter. Sie verleiht allmählich die Eigenschaft einer schadenfrohen Überlegenheit: Man ist zuletzt einem bissigen Hunde gleich, der noch das Lachen gelernt hat außer dem Beißen" ["Getting used to irony and sarcasm spoils the character, by the way. It assigns slowly the attitude of a sense of superiority filled with *Schadenfreude*. At the end one is like a savage dog that has also learned the art of laughter, apart from the skill of biting"—my trans.]. See also William Ian Miller, *Humiliation: And Other Essays on Honor, Social Discomfort, and Violence* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993).

and hence specifically of irony, since sarcasm generally pursues a much more aggressive approach.<sup>3</sup>

The term itself, “sarcasm,” derives from ancient Greek, with “sarc” or “sarx” meaning “raw meat” or “flesh”; hence “sarcasm” implies a kind of laughter or ridicule that cuts into the flesh, and represents the highest, most extreme form of irony, with little or no sympathy for the victim. The best known sarcastic speakers in antiquity were said to be Demosthenes and Cicero, while in modern times Bertolt Brecht and Karl Kraus were famous as sarcastic humorists in German literature.<sup>4</sup> Noteworthy statements entailing sarcastic comments are known from such luminaries as Georg C. Lichtenberg, Charles Dickens, Groucho Marx, William Faulkner, Oscar Wilde, Ernest Hemingway, and Thomas Pynchon.<sup>5</sup> Sarcasm is very close to irony, but it is more biting, more aggressive, a kind of irony with no gloves on.<sup>6</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary defines the term very similarly, and cites a comment by Spenser in 1579 in its earliest use.<sup>7</sup> Richard Sherry might have been an even earlier authority (1550), not to forget famous Erasmus of Rotterdam, especially if we consider his monumental *Moriae Encomium* (1509).<sup>8</sup> Surprisingly, the Grimms’ German Dictionary does not have an entry for it, and not even for irony.<sup>9</sup> However, sarcasm can already be found in many medieval texts, and this quite naturally so, since it is an outburst of human anger, frustration, or bitterness cast in a sophisticated but biting mode of speech, which medieval writers reflected on in numerous instances, as well.<sup>10</sup>

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3 Edgar Lapp, *Linguistik der Ironie*. 2nd ed. Tübinger Beiträge zur Linguistik, 369 (1992; Tübingen: Narr, 1997).

4 Gero von Wilpert, *Sachwörterbuch der Literatur*. 8th, improved and expanded ed. (1955; Stuttgart: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 2001), 717.

5 Ross Murfin and Supryia M. Ray, *The Bedford Glossary of Critical and Literary Terms*. Third ed. (Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin’s, 2009), 456–57.

6 For a good collection of relevant quotes from important sources, see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Sarcasm> (last accessed on Aug. 10, 2014).

7 <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/170938?redirectedFrom=sarcasm#eid> (last accessed on Aug. 12, 2014).

8 Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek, *Was ist literarischer Sarkasmus? Ein Beitrag zur deutsch-jüdischen Moderne* (Munich: Fink, 2009), 70.

9 Most other relevant dictionaries also draw a blank: <http://woerterbuchnetz.de/> (last accessed on Aug. 14, 2014). The term “Sarkasmus” seems to have entered the German language only in the sixteenth century; see Wolfgang Pfeifer, ed., *Etymologisches Wörterbuch des Deutschen: Q-Z* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1989), 1476 (with no source documentation). This does not mean, of course, that the phenomenon itself did not exist beforehand.

10 John Haiman, *Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1998); Andrea Bowes and Albert Katz, “When Sarcasm Stings,” *Discourse Processes* 48.4 (2011): 215–36, doi: 10.1080/0163853X.2010.532757. They ob-

Sarcasm was commonly discussed in antiquity within the context of political rhetoric, but then also in the Middle Ages, such as by Augustine in his *De civitate Dei* (412–426), who basically rejected it, and Thomas Aquinas in the 18th book of his *Summa theologiae* (73rd quaestio), who associated it with deadly sin because of the speaker's hubris and effort to hurt the addressee maliciously.<sup>11</sup> Whether sarcasm ever appeared in medieval literary texts, however, has not yet been fully discussed by modern scholarship, whereas sarcasm in modern literature is fairly well covered by now.<sup>12</sup>

However, since sarcasm plays such a big role in everyday speech today, allowing individuals to attack others rather viciously without displaying their true face, thus keeping a thin veneer of respect or politeness,<sup>13</sup> it might not come as a surprise that medieval literature is also filled with numerous examples of sarcasm, as the present volume intends to demonstrate. To take a step back at first, contrary to many expectations, irony also strongly permeates medieval texts, as I have demonstrated recently elsewhere (2014), building on the research by D. H. Green (1979), Dilwyn Knox (1989), and Gerd Althoff and Christel Meier (2011).<sup>14</sup> Similarly surprising might be that medieval people were often reported as laughing, which we find easily proven in countless literary examples and even art-historical objects.<sup>15</sup> It is not hard to recognize also other types of humor, such as ridicule, black humor, parody, satire, etc.<sup>16</sup>

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serve, for instance, that the victim of sarcasm does not recognize or acknowledge the humor intended, whereas the perpetrator does so specifically. "Sarcasm, in its guise as being nasty and in socially marginalizing people, is perceived as more negative than directly insulting comments" (quoted from the online version, conclusion).

11 B[urkhard] Meyer-Sickendiek, "Sarkasmus," *Historische Wörterbuch der Rhetorik*, ed. Gert Ueding, vol. 8 (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 2007), 436–47. Even such a massive and inclusive encyclopedia as Johann Heinrich Zedler's *Grosses vollständiges Universal-Lexikon aller Wissenschaften und Künste* (1732–1750; Graz: Akademische Druck- u. Verlagsanstalt, 1961–1964), vol. 34 (for letter S), does not include an entry for sarcasm.

12 Burkhard Meyer-Sickendiek, *Was ist literarischer Sarkasmus?* (2009). He also reviews the history of sarcasm tracing it back to antiquity, but then skips over the Middle Ages, focusing mostly on modern Jewish literature.

13 Patricia Ann Rockwell, *Sarcasm and Other Mixed Messages: The Ambiguous Ways People Use Language* (Lewiston, Queenston, and Lampeter: The Edwin Mellen Press, 2006).

14 Albrecht Classen, "Irony in Medieval and Early Modern German Literature (*Nibelungenlied*, Mauritius von Craûn, Johannes von Tepl's Ackermann): The Encounter of the Menschlich-Allzumenschlich in a Medieval Context," *Journal of English and Germanic Philology* 113.2 (2014): 184–205.

15 See the contributions to *Laughter in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Times: Epistemology of a Fundamental Human Behavior, Its Meaning, and Consequences*, ed. Albrecht Classen. *Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture*, 5 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2010).

But what about sarcasm? As far as I can tell, there is no study to date dealing with sarcasm in medieval German literature. However, there are many sarcastic comments in medieval German chronicles, remarks uttered by individuals whose biting tongue made them infamous, at least for those chroniclers, who normally must have heard stories told about those witty but bitter characters.<sup>17</sup> The same applies to heroic epics, courtly romances, verse narratives, and other genres. Our modern question regarding sarcasm simply uncovers new layers of meaning and relevance in those medieval texts, and raising the question where we might find sarcasm in medieval literature thus opens new doors for a critical analysis concerning the basic human conditions as expressed in Middle High German and other literature.

### Sarcasm in the *Njal's Saga* (prior to 1300)

Most people, when asked to identify sarcastic remarks in modern media, might think of the famous, if not infamous, British comedy sketch show by the group known as *Monty Python*, which aired on BBC television from 1969 to 1974 and which has attracted worldwide popularity ever since.<sup>18</sup> Their black humor, often based on sarcasm, has gained global fame, the sketches and their themes, frequently set in the Middle Ages, being the only specific link connecting the general public with the Middle Ages. But *Monty Python* included at least one well-trained medievalist, Terry Jones, as best reflected by their first proper fea-

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However, the theme of sarcasm was not addressed there. For older studies with a focus on German literature, see the contributions to *Komische Gegenwelten: Lachen und Literatur in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Werner Röcke and Helga Neumann (Paderborn, Munich, et al.: Ferdinand Schöningh, 1999). Excellent art-historical material for this topic can be found in *Seliges Lächeln und höllisches Gelächter: Das Lachen in der Kunst und Kultur des Mittelalters*, ed. Winfried Wilhelmy (Mainz: Bischöfliches Dom- und Diözesanmuseum, 2012).

**16** Sebastian Coxon, *Laughter and Narrative in the Later Middle Ages: German Comic Tales 1350–1525* (London: Legenda, 2008).

**17** For a short selection, see the collection at: <http://everything2.com/title/Sarcasm+in+the+Middle+Ages> (last accessed on Aug. 12, 2014). There are numerous cartoons from our days out there depicting situations in the Middle Ages through a highly sarcastic lens. See now my own study, "The Bitter, Biting Humor of Sarcasm in Medieval and Early Modern Literature," *Neophilologus* 101.3 (2017): 417–31; online at: doi:10.1007/s11061–017–9526–8.

**18** Jeff Birkenstein, Anna Froula, and Karen Randell, *The Cinema of Terry Gilliam: It's a Mad World*. Director's cuts (London and New York: Wallflower Press, 2013); Michael Norman Salda, *Arthurian Animation: A Study of Cartoon Camelots on Film and Television* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2013); see also the excellent summary article at: [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty\\_Python](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python) (last accessed on Aug. 12, 2014).

ture film *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975). The most peculiar form of sarcasm emerges in the episode with the Black Knight,<sup>19</sup> and I might have found a possible source of inspiration for it, taking us directly to the heart of the matter at stake here, sarcasm: the powerful and ponderous Icelandic epic poem, the *Njal's Saga* (late thirteenth century). I want to start with this as a lead-in for the discussion of further examples taken from German medieval literature.<sup>20</sup>

The author of this saga was keenly concerned with justice, peace-making, and other strategies to avoid or to compensate for violence. Communication and friendship, especially between Gunnar and Njal, matter greatly, but at times Gunnar cannot help and must defend himself physically against some of his enemies. At one point, Gunnar and his brother Kolskegg are attacked, and a bitter, bloody fight breaks out, from which the two heroes surface triumphantly. They hack their opponents so terribly into pieces that one of the enemies, Starkad, utters in desperation: "Let's flee – these aren't men we're dealing with" (107). He is almost right in this assessment, since limbs are flying off, heads are cut apart, and bodies are sundered into halves. At one point Kolskegg faces Kol, who thrusts a spear at him. Since the former just has killed another man, he cannot defend himself quite effectively now, so the spear penetrates the outside of his thigh and goes all the way through. Not being disturbed by that, Kolskegg steps up and cuts off Kol's leg and asks him most sarcastically: "Did that hit you or not?" (106). Kol only remarks, with the driest of all possible humors, that it was all his own fault since he did not shield himself enough. The narrator then intervenes and observes that Kol keeps standing on one leg for a while looking at the stump. He is mortally wounded, but seems unmoved and composed, yet he is no longer able to fight. Kolskegg notices the ridiculous situation and adds insult to injury: "You don't need to look: it's just as you think, the leg is gone" (107). Thereupon Kol collapses and dies, probably because of massive loss of blood.

The fighting then continues, but no further sarcasm rises to the surface. In fact, we would have to look far and wide even in this saga to discover a similarly facetious situation clearly amounting to black humor. Both Gunnar and Njal are

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19 [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty\\_Python\\_and\\_the\\_Holy\\_Grail](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Monty_Python_and_the_Holy_Grail); for the scene with the Black Knight, see [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black\\_Knight\\_%28Monty\\_Python%29](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Black_Knight_%28Monty_Python%29) (both last accessed on Aug. 14, 2014).

20 *Njal's Saga*, trans. with intro. and notes by Robert Cook (London: Penguin Books, 1997); *Njáls saga (Reykjabók): the Arna-Magnean manuscript 468, 4to*, intro. Jón Helgason. Manuscripta Islandica 6 (Copenhagen, Munksgaard, 1962). For a good introduction, see Vésteinn Ólason, "Njal's Saga," *Medieval Scandinavia: An Encyclopedia*, ed. Phillip Pulsiano (New York and London: Garland Publishing, 1993), 432–34.

too concerned to appease opponents, to avoid the escalation of violence, or to uphold their own honor to allow themselves poking fun at their opponents or enemies. Arbitration and negotiations are the key words in our context, which makes Kolskegg's sarcastic remark in that specific episode quite noteworthy. If the context and content of the *Njal's Saga* were not so serious in ethical, political, and social terms, we might expect such a case of taunting sarcasm to emerge. However, this is not frivolous laughter which Kolskegg's comment provokes. He actually states the obvious, nothing but a fact, appropriate for the cold-blooded exchange between these two men. But Kolskegg still expresses in a striking fashion that he has achieved his desired goal and that Kol cannot deny the fact of having lost his leg, which is tantamount to his life. Kolskegg might not intend sarcasm, but the effect of his words is still the same, since he indirectly ridicules his opponent and tells him that despite his best hopes all is over for him.

We clearly sense that the sarcasm here is specifically located in the fine line between life and death, since this is no longer irony. Moreover, sarcasm is here not predicated on a power differential since both men are mighty warriors of more or less the same social status. But Kolskegg has already proven to be the victor in this case and now only tells his opponent that there is no use in gazing at the stump, the fight is over. In this regard we would have to adjust the definition of sarcasm and open it up also for such comments uttered by one man to another telling him that he has failed or lost. Kolskegg only states the obvious, but he is still ridiculing the opponent. This is neither irony nor black humor, but sarcasm because of the deadly situation and the discrepancy between Kol's desperate but useless ruminations on whether he still might have a chance and Kolskegg's straightforward comment, which certainly transpires as sarcastic because he demonstrates thus his superiority and victory.

## Sarcasm in the Old High German *Hildebrandslied* (early ninth century)

A similar phenomenon comes to the surface in the oldest text in medieval German literature, the *Hildebrandslied*.<sup>21</sup> Copied down only once in a Fulda manuscript in the early ninth century, probably by two monkish scribes, it reflects back on ancient history when the Hunnish ruler Attila still lived and when the

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21 For a good introduction, see now Victor Millet, *Germanische Heldendichtung im Mittelalter: Eine Einführung*. de Gruyter Studienbuch (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2008), 24–47.

Ostrogothic King Theoderic had hunted down the Byzantine general Odoacer, establishing thereby his own kingdom in Italy.<sup>22</sup> The historical framework as outlined by the poet(s) contradicts what we actually know from the chronicles since Theoderic had murdered Odoacer, whereas here in our text the latter is said to have been triumphant, having forced the former to flee and seek rescue in exile with the Hunnish ruler. All this, however, does not concern us here, whereas the exchange between father and son matters centrally, both being subordinate vassal members of large feudal clans.

In this fragmentary epic poem Hildebrand, who has fought in the service of his lord Dieterich, or Theoderic, for thirty years without having ever returned home, suddenly encounters his son on the battlefield, himself leading an army, just as his old father does. The two engage in a conversation dominated by the old man, who quickly realizes that the other is his son based on what the younger man tells him about his family. Clumsily, Hildebrand tries to convince Hadubrand that he is his father by way of taking off heavy golden rings from his arm to hand them over to Hadubrand as gifts. As to be expected, the young man rejects those as a bad form of bribery on the battlefield. Filled with pride, but also some bitterness, he tells him that, according to his understanding, his father has died a long time ago as a mighty warrior whose memory he highly esteems.

By contrast, he suspects Hildebrand, in whom he recognizes only a Hunnish warrior because of his external appearance, of being a coward or a weakling, no longer willing or able to fight; hence his attempt to deceive and subdue the enemy with the help of those rings of gold. Hadubrand is firmly convinced of his father's death since experienced and wise people, especially "seolidante" [sailors] (42), had told him so. With these words Hadubrand falls silent and only awaits the attack, while Hildebrand continues to lament his destiny being forced to battle against his own son. However, in his traditionally heroic attitude and value system, he does not see any alternative, so he readies himself, and the two men rush against each other.

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<sup>22</sup> For a solid text edition, see *Althochdeutsche Literatur: Mit altniederdeutschen Textbeispielen. Auswahl mit Übertragungen und Kommentar*, ed. Horst Dieter Schlosser (1998; Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2004), 68–71. For a useful introduction, see Brian Murdoch, "Das Hildebrandslied," *German Writers and Works of the Early Middle Ages: 800–1170*, ed. Will Hasty and James Hardin. Dictionary of Literary Biography 148 (Detroit, MI: Gale Research, 1995), 196–201; Murdoch, "Heroic Verse," *German Literature of the Early Middle Ages*, ed. Brian Murdoch. The Camden House History of German Literature, 2 (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2004), 120–37. This heroic epic poem is, of course, discussed in every history of German literature.



The outcome is not known, the poem ends as a fragment. Nevertheless, both the ninth-century readers and we today can clearly recognize what the three possible options might be. First, the father, being the most experienced and mightiest fighter, might kill his son. Second, the son might win and kill his father because of his youthful strength and alacrity. Third, since both warriors are the leaders of their people, and this for good reasons, they are equal in strength and fighting power and thus kill each other. At any event, there cannot be a good outcome since human communication has failed and traditional family bonds have been destroyed by the overarching dominance of feudal loyalty and vassallic submission. Both men lead armies, or at least bands of men, who are about to clash with each other since they represent two different tribes, and the poem reflects only the short lull before the fighting breaks out.

A long time ago, Hildebrand had been forced to follow Theotrihe (Theoderic/Dieterich) (19), neglecting his wife and child for the sake of his lord, and now, when he has finally come across Hadubrand, he is no longer able to reach out and to establish the necessary relationship or communicative channel to avoid the mutual slaughter.<sup>23</sup> War is destroying, as the poet(s) indicates, the basic human character in us, and we must do everything possible to prevent the spiral downturn in our existence as a consequence of this military mentality. In this light, it made perfect sense for the monks/scribes to record this entirely pagan poem in the Christian book of liturgy, because it allowed them, indirectly, to teach their parish how destructive their old values proved to be and that only a Christian way of life would lead to a constructive future.

While the first part of the *Hildebrandslied* is determined by a fairly open communication between both men, as soon as Hildebrand tries to draw consequences from his new knowledge about his opposite, he inadvertently threatens to undermine Hadubrand's sense of identity, who hence withdraws completely and only waits for the old man's attack.<sup>24</sup> As much as the poem seems to project ancient warrior ideals and the values of vassallic feudalism, the foreseeable outcome dramatically undercuts those and signals that a radical change would be necessary for humanity to survive.

As tragic as the result then proves to be, from a rhetorical perspective we recognize a very rich employment of a variety of topics and strategies, among which

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**23** Albrecht Classen, *Verzweiflung und Hoffnung. Die Suche nach der kommunikativen Gemeinschaft in der deutschen Literatur des Mittelalters*. Beihefte zur Mediaevistik, 1 (Frankfurt a. M., Berlin, et al.: Peter Lang, 2002), 1–52.

**24** Walter Haug, "Die Grausamkeit der Heldensage: Neue gattungstheoretische Überlegungen zur heroischen Dichtung," in *Brechungen auf dem Weg zur Individualität: Kleine Schriften zur Literatur des Mittelalters* (orig. 1994; Tübingen: Max Niemeyer, 1995), 72–90.



sarcasm emerges as one of the dominant approaches.<sup>25</sup> The conversation between the two men seems to develop relatively constructively, until Hildebrand offers the rings of gold. Giving gifts in such a dangerous situation, however, undermines all possible developments, since the young man can recognize in them only an effort by the opponent to dull his attention and to deceive him about his real intentions.<sup>26</sup> Literally resorting to sarcasm, he rejects such gifts, insisting that a man would receive such rings only with the tip of his spear, hence should renounce them as unworthy of his character and honor (37–38).

Without knowing details, but judging from Hildebrand's appearance in his armor and with his weapons, not forgetting the Hunnish gold, he addresses him, whom he has not asked one question so far, as a Hun, and as an old man on top of it: “du bist dir, alter Hun, unmet spaher” [“Old Hun, you are exceedingly cunning”] (39). He trusts only the sailors who have told him a long time ago of his father's death; hence the claim by the old warrior that he is his father cannot convince him. Sarcasm is fully at play here insofar as the situation is one of life and death, and Hadubrand has to be extremely careful in handling himself. Giving in at this moment, accepting the rings without having any proof that Hildebrand is really his father, would be tantamount to a personal failure and public admission of weakness. In fact, Hadubrand has no choice and must respond with violence, but he first repels the other man, ridicules him, mocking his attempt to employ cunning, as he perceives it. Again, we recognize sarcasm, but not as a *modus operandi* between an inferior and a superior. Nevertheless, it is not irony, for sure, since the stakes are too high for that; again, the exchange is situated between life and death.

But Hildebrand does not allow him to gain the upper hand in this rhetorical battle of wits. The question now arises who of these two men is the stronger and more courageous one, ready for the fight and set to gain victory. Given that Hildebrand knows for sure now that Hadubrand is not going to accept him as father, believing too strongly what the sailors and others had told him contrary to the actual facts, he also resorts to sarcasm, noting contemptuously that the other man must have a good lord at home who seems to have provided him with a splendid armor—apparently Odoacer, who had forced Theoderic into exile, and hence also Hildebrand. More specifically, Hadubrand is so much

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25 Wolfgang Haubrichs, *Die Anfänge: Versuche volkssprachiger Schriftlichkeit im frühen Mittelalter* (ca. 700–1050/60. Geschichte der deutschen Literatur von den Anfängen bis zum Beginn der Neuzeit I, 1 (Frankfurt a. M.: Athenäum, 1988), 147–59; he recognized the sarcastic element already in Hildebrand's words, 156.

26 William C. McDonald, “‘Too Softly a Gift of Treasure’: A Rereading of the Old High German *Hildebrandslied*,” *Euphorion* 78.1 (1984): 1–16, discusses the various meanings of gift-giving.

part of the vassalic system back home that he did not have to go into exile, as had been the case with Hildebrand (46–48). These few lines are loaded with sarcasm, characterized by personal bitterness, considering that he complains about the fact that he himself had to suffer for thirty years living and fighting in distant lands and now has to realize that his own son is affiliated with his enemy, Odoacer.

For a short moment Hildebrand then snaps out of his wrath and anger, and reflects on his own destiny, which he cannot influence. In fact, he is lamenting his own helplessness and the tragedy which ensues for him that now, after thirty years of battling for his lord, he has to face his own son and kill him or be killed by the latter. Then, being newly resolved, he turns back to Hadubrand, whom he approaches with even stronger sarcasm. Shedding all previous attempts to extend kindness and even love to his son, now he attempts to ridicule him, encouraging him to try his own strength to defeat this old man (“heremo man,” 56) and to rob him of his armor, if he might have any entitlement to it: “‘ibu du dar enic reht habes’” (57). Rounding off this short speech, he emphasizes that denying Hadubrand this fight would be indeed a sign of utmost cowardice among those warriors who had to go into exile. With this he lets go of his sarcasm and calls for the fight, the challenge, the test to find out who between them would be the strongest and best soldier (60–62). There are no more words of family bonds and personal suffering, mourning and longing; instead the cold-blooded warrior mentality sets in again and leads both of them into this deadly confrontation without any real hope for survival.

Contrary to many expectations regarding heroic epics as poems reflecting sheer manly qualities as warriors, we recognize easily how much the *Hildebrandslied* is deeply determined by a range of human emotions and a host of rhetorical devices. Sarcasm emerges as the dominant tone and strategy in the second half, since the communication breaks down, all attempts by Hildebrand to reach out to his son have failed, and battle between them remains the only option left. Even though the text hardly comments on the underlying feelings, we observe with little difficulty how much this early heroic poem was already predicated on the awareness that much human life is determined by a complex set of emotions, desires, urges, and reactions.<sup>27</sup> Sarcastic replies confirm that this is not a simple woodcut-like heroic poem, but a sophisticated literary attempt to

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<sup>27</sup> Globally, for heroic literature in a transcultural framework, see the contributions to *Epic and History*, ed. David Konstan and Kurt A. Raaflaub. *The Ancient World: Comparative Histories* (Maldon, MA, and Oxford: Blackwell, 2010).

reflect on problematic relations between two competing individuals, separated by age, culture, and political conditions.

## Sarcasm in the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200)

If discussing the *Hildebrandslied* in such a short space was already difficult, to come to terms with the *Nibelungenlied* (ca. 1200) will be even much more so. Since the *Nibelungenlied* is one of the great “classics” of medieval literature, scholars have paid much attention to this text and studied seemingly every possible aspect already.<sup>28</sup> Irony emerges here a number of times, and the intricate relationships between the individual protagonists have proven to be highly complex, often requiring a psychological reading, at least from our perspective, for an adequate interpretation.<sup>29</sup> A number of specific passages contain clear examples of irony, but some of those also prove to be rather sarcastic because of the bitterness of the tone and the aggressiveness of the verbal exchange.

In my previous investigation regarding irony, I also included the passage at Brünhild’s court, where the Burgundians are trying to support their King Gunther in his wooing of the Icelandic princess. To their great discomfort, they had to drop all their weapons and armor, which causes them great anxiety. When Brünhild overhears their rumbling and bitter complaints, but also their boasting about their own strength if only they had their weapons again, she realizes their pettiness and orders that they can rearm themselves. She smiles mockingly (“mit smielendem munde,” stanza 445, 2) and remarks that in that case, with Hagen feeling so courageous and self-assured once he would have his weapons back, he should be entitled to them. Brünhild herself does not express any fear and actually, relying more on sarcasm than on irony, thus effectively ridicules the Burgundians altogether.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> *A Companion to the Nibelungenlied*, ed. Winder McConnell. Studies in German Literature, Linguistics, and Culture (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 1998); Jan-Dirk Müller, *Das Nibelungenlied*. 3rd, newly rev. ed. Klassiker-Lektüren 5 (2001; Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2009). For an excellent critical edition I draw from *Das Nibelungenlied: Mittelhochdeutsch/Neuhochdeutsch*. Nach der Handschrift B herausgegeben von Ursula Schulz. Ins Neuhochdeutsche übersetzt und kommentiert von Siegfried Grosse (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2010).

<sup>29</sup> Irmgard Gephart, *Der Zorn der Nibelungen: Rivalität und Rache im “Nibelungenlied”* (Cologne, Weimar, and Vienna: Böhlau Verlag, 2005).

<sup>30</sup> Kathryn Starkey, “Brunhild’s Smile: Emotion and the Politics of Gender in the *Nibelungenlied*” *Codierungen von Emotionen im Mittelalter*, ed. C. Stephen Jaeger and Ingrid Kasten. Trends in Medieval Philology, 1 (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2003), 159–73.

Probing this issue further, it seems necessary to distinguish here more clearly between irony and sarcasm, giving preponderance to the latter since Brünhild's response reveals her utter contempt of those men, whom she does not need to regard as worthy of her concern.<sup>31</sup> This is sarcasm because the warriors are afraid of dying in case their King Gunther cannot win the competition against the Icelandic queen.

By the same token, Brünhild resorts to sarcasm once again later after she has been defeated and must accept Gunther as her future husband. When Dancwart, Hagen's brother, takes over the key to her treasure, he spends it so profligately that she worries about losing all her wealth. Full of anger she protests, wondering aloud whether Dancwart believes that her death is near, which would make it unnecessary for her to keep her belongings (stanza 516). She herself could squander her gold and dresses and would not need the Burgundian warrior doing that for her. Sarcastically she concludes: “sô milten kamerære gewan noch kuneginne nie” [“a queen has never had such a generous treasurer”] (stanza 516, 4).

The situation proves to be a miserable one for her since she has effectively lost all power, and yet suspects that this is all the result of deception, the foundation for which she has not yet fathomed (stanza 519, 3). To make matters worse, when she then orders twenty travel chests to be filled with gold and silver and insists that only her own treasurers observe this process, both Gunther and Hagen break out in loud laughter, ridiculing the queen's desperate but useless attempt to maintain her own power and influence at least to a modicum (stanza 519, 4). Even though they do not say a word at that moment, they express biting, hurtful sarcasm, adding insult to injury.

But Brünhild is not quite yet finished and maintains tremendous power through her physical might. On the wedding night, when Gunther tries to sleep with her, she simply fetters his hands and feet with her belt (stanza 634) and hangs him on a nail for the whole night, as if he were nothing but a sack full of things. In the morning she turns to him and inquires, mockingly: “Nu sagt mir, her Gunther, ist iu daz iht leit, / ob iuch gebunden fünden...di iuwern kamerære von einer vrouwen hant?” [“Now tell me, Sir Gunther, would it not grieve you if your chamber servants were to find you there bound by the hand of a woman?”] (stanza 637, 1–3).<sup>32</sup> Her sarcasm exposes Gunther's true weakness, at least compared to her, and from then on he stays far away from her, not daring

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<sup>31</sup> In this context I must reevaluate my own position (Classen, “Irony in Medieval and Early Modern German Literature” [see note 14]) and vote for sarcasm as the correct assessment here.

<sup>32</sup> This and all other translations are my own, but I have consulted alternative translations into modern German and English to verify the accuracy.

to touch her, until on the second wedding night Siegfried comes in and substitutes for Gunther, obviously raping her, which thus finishes her off as a character of relevance in the epic poem. The text does not indicate that it is rape, especially since Siegfried explicitly had promised Gunther not to do so (stanza 653, 2), but all the circumstances indicate that the rape happens after all. Later, Kriemhild reveals the truth when she openly states that Siegfried had first slept with Brünhild and had thus subdued her for Gunther (stanza 837, 3–4, and stanza 846, 3–4).

This is the beginning of the end, the subsequent disaster evolves from here, first with the murder of Siegfried, then Kriemhild's attempt to avenge herself, her marriage with King Ezzel, the invitation of her brothers to her court in the land of the Huns, the battle, and the final Armageddon. There is no more room for laughter, irony, and thus also not for sarcasm, since the slaughter engulfs, ultimately, all the Burgundians and their Hunnish opponents, and at the end also destroys Kriemhild.

Even comparisons with the *Njal's Saga* would not help identifying more situations in which sarcasm might come forth, since Kriemhild's absolute hatred of Hagen and her unquenchable desire to kill him dominate the rest of the text. But we can also begin to understand some of the reasons why this epic poem has survived in so many manuscripts (37 in total).<sup>33</sup> This is not a narrative determined only by heroic deeds, wars, slaughter, and fighting. All those elements matter greatly, of course, but the human dimension behind those events matters even more, reflecting hatred, love, passion, envy, jealousy, fear, and anger. Sarcasm thus proves to be an excellent gauge for the determination of literary quality, since it reflects a considerably diversified approach to human existence and human communication. Sarcasm is possible until the situation turns around and the serious battle begins in the second part of the epic poem.

## Sarcasm in Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius* (ca. 1186/1190)

Hartmann von Aue's *Gregorius*, a remarkably powerful religious narrative of a miraculous transformation of a human sinner into God's own chosen successor to the papal throne, has survived in thirteen manuscripts,<sup>34</sup> and, while Hartmann himself drew from an Old French source, his narrative was translated three times into Latin, and it was adapted two times in Middle and Early New High German.

<sup>33</sup> <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/271> (last accessed on Aug. 13, 2014).

<sup>34</sup> <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/149> (last accessed on Aug. 13, 2014).

Most famously, Thomas Mann published a novel, *Der Erwählte* (1951), directly based on Hartmann's work.<sup>35</sup> The story itself proves to be highly intriguing, but it is so well known that I want to highlight only one of the key components, that is, Gregorius as the product of incest. Once he has finally learned the truth, he withdraws from the world and lets a fisherman lock him onto a rock in the middle of a lake, where he survives with God's help for seventeen years, after which he is finally chosen by God as the new pope.

Filled with desperation about his sinfulness, Gregorius wanders through the woods without eating, until he reaches the house of a fisherman, where he hopes to find some rest. The fisherman immediately recognizes a grave discrepancy between Gregorius's noble and well-kept body and the poor appearance he makes now after three days. He lambasts him severely and sends him on his way, but the wife, feeling pity, brings him back, appealing to her husband to keep God in mind and to allow her to take care of the stranger. Even though she offers him her best food, Gregorius refuses and only wants to accept a little bread and water, constantly trying to redeem some of the sinfulness imposed on him by his parents. The fisherman observes this behavior and badly mocks the stranger, pointing out that in light of his splendid bodily appearance he must have always enjoyed very good food, not simply bread (2904–05). In fact, he comments that, judging from his cheeks, thighs, and feet he must be one of the most attractive men in the world (1909–10). The fisherman even notices that Gregorius's toes are clean and polished, and his feet do not show any signs of having suffered in harsh nature (2915–21). He indirectly admires his hair, his arms, and hands, and then charges him with pretending to be a penitent, whereas before he must have enjoyed a good life in worldly society (2929–34).

The real sarcasm enters the picture when the fisherman claims that according to his opinion the stranger would soon enough abandon his performance as a rueful Christian and return to his previously luxurious life (2935–37). In fact, he predicts that soon enough Gregorius would shudder at the thought of having eaten such a dry piece of bread and having drunk nothing but water from the well (2938–41).

After Gregorius has shared his personal concern about finding a place where he could redeem his sinfulness, the fisherman suddenly seems to respond in

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<sup>35</sup> Hartmann von Aue, *Gregorius, Der arme Heinrich, Iwein*, ed. and trans. by Volker Mertens. Bibliothek des Mittelalters, 6 (Frankfurt a. M.: Deutscher Klassiker Verlag, 2004), 797–802. For Mann's understanding and awareness of the Middle Ages, see Albrecht Classen, "Der Kampf um das Mittelalter im Werk Thomas Manns: *Der Zauberberg*: Die menschliche Misere im Kreuzfeuer geistesgeschichtlicher Strömungen," *Studia Neophilologica* 75 (2003): 32–46.

kind, happily announcing that he would know just such a place on a rock in the middle of the lake, “dâ mac dir wol werden wê” [“there you will certainly experience woes”] (2980). To add injury to insult, he offers him even further penance, having locks for his ankles which would make it impossible for Gregorius ever to leave the rock. If he were really bound to do penance, those shackles would help him tremendously (2986–88). His voice filled with rancor, he points out that this way he would not be able to abandon his penance even if he desired to do so (2996–97).

Not satisfied with this indirect mockery, the fisherman then promises Gregorius that he would, out of love for him, take him to that rock in his boat the next morning (3006). Once having locked him there, he himself would be safe from any possible molestation by this strange penitent: “mich niemer gedrangest” [“you will never bother me”] (3013). Pretending to be caring and concerned, he concludes his most sarcastic speech with the remark, that, once all those conditions would have been achieved, he himself would no longer have to worry that Gregorius would bother him again, and he would be free of any concern: “des bin ich gar âne angst” [“I am not concerned with that”] (3014).

No further example of sarcasm can be found in this religious narrative, but it is an important case because the fisherman understandably feels duped by this strange figure and cannot make sense out of his desire to be taken away to that island voluntarily—a clear death penalty in human terms. He does not comprehend Gregorius’s religious motivation and his suffering from the incest charge imposed on him by his parents and which he himself had committed with his mother.<sup>36</sup> All the critical elements necessary for sarcasm are present: the dialogue between these two men, the discrepancy in their positions, the fisherman’s taunting of the other in his assumed pretentiousness, the reliance on veiled language, and a sharp tongue directed against helpless Gregorius.

It is certainly ironic that Gregorius has to suffer from this barrage of hateful words, considering that he is a prince and has now turned into a penitent, but the strategy employed by the fisherman to ridicule the stranger is still predicated on sarcasm insofar as he aggressively tries to expose the foreigner in his presumed masquerading. The poor fisherman cannot accept Gregorius’s appearance

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36 David Duckworth, *Gregorius: A Medieval Man’s Discovery of His True Self*. Göppinger Arbeiten zur Germanistik, 422 (Göppingen: Kümmerle, 1985), 265–81; he recognizes only irony in the exchange between the fisherman and Gregorius, but the former harbors much too much bitterness and scorn to embrace simple irony. However, Duckworth is correct in recognizing: “The irony of the situation lies in the fact that Gregorius is now pure and single-minded in all that he says and does, but such a lout accuses him of being double-minded in everything, of being a living lie” (280).

as a penitent and considers it as hypocritical; almost being afraid that he might make fun of him in his low social status. We recognize, to be sure, the enormous range of narrative registers which Hartmann commands, including sarcasm as one of the harshest and most bitter approaches in human communication. Whereas the fisherman is a lowly man living from his meager income resulting from his work on the lake, Gregorius belongs to the highest echelons of society and yet tries to lower himself as far down as possible.

The fisherman senses the deep contradiction and resorts to sarcasm as the only rhetorical means he has available to defend himself against the strange appearance of this alleged penitent, as he at least perceives him, whose desire to suffer voluntarily in order to redeem his sinfulness remains inexplicable to him, which explains his brutality and recklessness regarding the stranger and whom he condemns, in practical terms, to die on the rock. His sarcasm, hence, proves to be the most acrimonious we will ever find.

### **Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* (ca. 1210)**

The more complex a medieval romance proves to be, the more likely the chance to discover a scene where sarcasm permeates a conversation. This is the case in Gottfried's *Tristan*, where the young hero fights on behalf of King Mark against the superior Irish knight Morold. The latter has terrorized the country, like many others, already for many years, but no one has ever had the strength and abilities to oppose him and to repel his extortions. For that reason Cornwall has become subject to Ireland, and when Morold arrives during Tristan's stay at Mark's court, he demands new tributes as in the past.

Tristan is the only one who dares to stand up to him, and the duel then takes place on an island where no one can disturb them or intervene in the fighting. Morold is the first one to cause Tristan a serious wound, and he even informs him that the tip of the sword had been poisoned. Only his sister, the Irish Queen Isolde, would be able to heal him.<sup>37</sup> Tristan almost seems finished, but

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37 Gottfried von Straßburg, *Tristan*, nach dem Text von Friedrich Ranke neu herausgegeben, ins Neuhochdeutsche übersetzt, mit einem Stellenkommentar und einem Nachwort von Rüdiger Krohn (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 1980), 6919 ff. Research on *Tristan* is legion, but see the excellent survey by Tomas Tomasek, *Gottfried von Straßburg* (Stuttgart: Philipp Reclam, 2007); Christoph Huber, *Gottfried von Straßburg: Tristan*. 3rd rev. and expanded ed. (2000; Berlin: Erich Schmidt, 2013); for individual studies, see the contributions to *Tristan and Isolde: A Casebook*, ed. with an intro. by Joan Tasker Grimbert. Arthurian Characters and Themes (New York and London: Routledge, 2002).



he then can rally new strength, and in his good fortune he manages to catch Morold in a bad situation. He had run him down with his horse, but Morold had then cut off one of the legs of Tristan's horse. Then, grabbing his helmet, Morold rushes to his horse, trying to get back on it. At that very moment Tristan arrives and cuts off his hand, which makes him fall down. Tristan immediately follows through and cuts into his head, killing him outright.

As gory as the entire episode might be, it allows the poet to have Tristan enter into a mocking, sarcastic monologue, addressing the dead opponent:

“wie dô, wie dô?” sprach Tristan  
 “sô dir got, Môrolt, sag an,  
 ist dir dirre maere iht kunt?  
 mich dunket, dû sîst sêre wunt.  
 Ich waene, dîn dinc ûbele stê.

[“How so, how so?” asked Tristan.  
 “By God, Morold, speak up,  
 have you never experienced this situation?  
 It seems to me that you are sorely wounded.  
 I guess that your case looks very badly.”] (7065–69)

There would not be any need for Tristan to address Morold since he can no longer hear him. But Tristan uses the situation to ventilate his deep frustration and to ridicule his opponent, who had oppressed Cornwall and other countries for so many years. But more specifically, this speech is in direct response to Morold's previous cunning attempt to convince Tristan to come over to his side, to become his friend, to get healed by his sister, and to share half of his land (6942–61). But Morold is regarded by everyone as a terror, and joining him would be the worst possible treason. Tristan now responds to Morold's own words a second time, emphasizing that the healing roots which Isolde would have applied (and actually later will apply, indeed, but then not knowing that it is Tristan) now would be much more necessary for her brother, whom Tristan has killed (7070–74). Of course, this sarcastic mockery is of no use for the dead man, but Tristan can thus enjoy his triumph to the last drop. Referring to God, he identifies Morold as a violator of the divine laws, whereas Tristan calls himself God's redeemer (7075–78). Instead of relying on the magical healing power of Queen Isolde, Tristan wants to rely on God as his only true helper. Finally he pronounces that Morold's long rule determined by hubris and arrogance has come to an end: “disiu hōhvert diu ist gelegen!” [“this pride has been overcome”] (7080). With this he cuts off his head and returns to the mainland, hiding his own wound from the public, particularly in order to deceive Morold's fellow Irishmen, who transport his body back home and report about the outcome.

It is little wonder that Gottfried, a true master narrator, also commands the register of sarcasm, even though it comes a little as a surprise to hear Tristan voice such contemptuous, biting words. However, Morold is thus exposed as a true perpetrator and usurper, who had committed much evil against the entire country. Tristan resorts to sarcasm because it allows him to release all of his pent-up frustration and anger and to deconstruct the myth that had surrounded Morold for far too long. By resorting to sarcasm, even though it carries an almost malicious tone, Tristan reveals how much anxiety and tension had filled him. It is almost a miracle that this young man could achieve this triumph; hence his sarcastic remarks allow him to ventilate all of his previous anxiety and stress.

### Sarcasm in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* (ca. 1205–1208)

As in the previous cases, it would go much too far to engage with Wolfram's entire romance, *Parzival*, which we might identify as the masterpiece of Middle High German literature, even if Gottfried does not seem to have liked it much, as he referred in his literary excursus to one disorganized, opaque account that did not meet his own expectations, lacking in clarity and poetic beauty (4665–80). The large number of eighty-seven manuscripts from the next centuries indicates how much Wolfram's *Parzival* enjoyed enormous popularity.<sup>38</sup> Various narrative strands intertwine and move apart again, and we can follow Parzival's life from his childhood, when he is growing up in the woods of Soltâne, until his adulthood, when he finally, after many years of searching, succeeds in redeeming the Grail kingdom and thus to restoring happiness here in this world. Wolfram even takes a look toward the Eastern world whereto Parzival's half-brother, the black-and white checkered Feirefiz, returns with his new-found wife, Repanse de Schoye, after he has been baptized and thus brings Christianity to the Orient.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>38</sup> <http://www.handschriftencensus.de/werke/437> (last accessed on Aug. 13, 2014).

<sup>39</sup> Wolfram von Eschenbach, *Parzival*. Studienausgabe. Mittelhochdeutscher Text nach der sechsten Ausgabe von Karl Lachmann. Übersetzung von Peter Knecht, Einführung zum Text von Bernd Schirok (Berlin and New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1998). For the best introduction and critical commentary, see Joachim Bumke, *Wolfram von Eschenbach*. 8th, completely newly rev. ed. Sammlung Metzler, 36 (Stuttgart and Weimar: Verlag J. B. Metzler, 2004); see also Michael Dallapiazza, *Wolfram von Eschenbach: Parzival*. Klassiker-Lektüren, 12 (Berlin: Erich Schmidt Verlag, 2009).

In the middle of this huge romance the narrator turns away from Parzival for an extended time and pays attention to the experiences of his friend, Gawân, who pursues his own happiness in trying to win Orgelûse's hand.<sup>40</sup> She is, however, a bitter, deeply hurt woman who cannot control her anger and vents her inner pain by ridiculing Gawân. In comparison with the previous examples, we might have difficulties recognizing the same kind of sarcasm in her words which she addresses to her lover, since they are so openly aggressive and insulting: “nie man sô grôze tumpheit dans, / ob ir mich diens welt gewern. / ôwê wie gern irz möht verbern!” [no man has ever carried so much stupidity. You want to offer me your service, oh dear, but I would like to decline it] (book 515, 14–16).

Then, however, she seemingly accepts that service, telling him to ride ahead of her, but only because it would be regretful if she were to lose sight of him (book 515, 30). Mockingly she praises him as a “Sus ahtbæren gesellen” [“such an impressive fellow”] (book 516, 1). When Gawân happens to find a curative root which he needs to help a wounded knight, she comments: “kan der geselle mân / arzet unde rîter sîn...” [“when my fellow knows how to be both medical doctor and knight...”] (book 516, 29–30). She comments that he thus might not have to worry about the future and his income as long as he would learn how to handle the various boxes for his sales as a vendor of medicine (book 517, 1–2).

Next the monstrous squire Malcrêatiure appears, who crudely maligns and reprimands Gawân without any justification. The latter takes his revenge and throws him off the horse, but cuts his palms badly when he takes the curious figure by the hair, which is so sharp and hard that it cuts into his skin. Orgelûse has nothing better to say but how much she enjoys watching the two fighting with each other (book 521, 16–17).

Not enough, once they have returned to the wounded knight and Gawân has treated him somewhat, that man suddenly gets up from the floor, jumps on Gawân's horse, and, being the thief that he is, rides away together with his mistress. This invites Orgelûse to voice further comments with which she intends to ridicule her lover even more painfully. She comments that she first had held him as a knight, then as a barber-surgeon, and now she must regard him as a squire, concluding with the remark: “sol iemen sîner kunst genesn, / sô troest iuch iwerre sinne” [“if anyone might find an income through his skills, you can be quite self-confident”] (book 523, 10–11).

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40 Albrecht Classen, “Crisis and Triumph in the World of Medieval Knighthood and Chivalry: Gawân in Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival*,” in *Gawain: Casebook*, ed. Raymond H. Thompson and Keith Busby (New York and London: Routledge, 2005), 217–29.

As trenchant as Orgelûse sounds, Gawân remains calm and does not let her sarcasm bother him since he truly loves her and stays completely loyal to her, whatever she might call him, knight or squire (book 523, 30). Their conversations proceed along the same lines, as Orgelûse continues to resort to her sarcasm, while Gawân stays steadfast in his wooing of her. She tries with all her might to provoke him, to belittle him, to scorn him, and to undermine his knightly honor, especially when he faces the challenge by another man (book 535, 12–24). Even the narrator feels repulsed by her and characterizes her speech as “hôchvertelîche” [extremely arrogant] (book 535, 12), underscoring thus how much sarcasm drives Orgelûse, though she is not fully justified in that, despite her deep pain over her previous loss.

Ultimately, Gawân achieves all his goals, proves to be the best of all knights, and can even redeem the injustice that had been done to her and her previous lover. This then paves the way for their new love to bloom and to restore happiness in the Arthurian world—to redeem the world of the Grail is Parzival’s task. We thus recognize that sarcasm was a strategy for Orgelûse to compensate for her inner suffering. She did not really want to belittle Gawân, but she could not help ridiculing him since he fell into the same category as all other knights. Through her sarcastic statements she tried to build a distance from him and to protect herself haphazardly from further pain resulting from love. But Orgelûse demonstrated, after all, an extraordinarily sharp tongue, biting in its extreme form of sarcasm. Nevertheless, at the end she drops her sarcasm altogether and grants Gawân her love. This is the same development as in Hartmann’s *Gregorius*, where finally the fisherman has to recognize that Gregorius is truly a man selected by God, especially when he discovers the key for the foot locks in the stomach of a fish.

## Conclusion

We have now firmly established that the verbal register of sarcasm was well represented in Middle High German literature. We could easily draw from many other examples, but this would only add grist to the mill. None of the texts we have examined proved to be woodcut-like. Instead, the emergence of sarcasm, just as of irony and parody, to name two other forms of humor, reflects the poets’ extensive awareness of the many different psychological layers in their fictional characters. Allowing them to resort to sarcasm makes it possible to include a variety of new registers in personal opinions, attitudes, and feelings. Even the heroic epics thereby prove to be much more complex in their presentation of the individual protagonists, who emerge as more life-like in their anger,

bitterness, or sense of triumph over an opponent. In The Stricker's *Karl der Große* (ca. 1240), for instance, when only three of Charlemagne's paladins are still alive, the King of Carthage, Algariez, hurls a spear through Bishop Olivier's body and then comments, sarcastically: "du hâst ein zeichen, daz den tût / vil gewisliche diutet, / als uns daz reht gebiutet" ["there is a sign on you that very certainly indicates death, as it seems to us properly"] (7480–82).<sup>41</sup> Even though mortally wounded, Olivier swings with his sword and cuts the opponent down, whom he then addresses, in likewise sarcastic fashion: "du maht ouch wol ein zeichen hân, /.../ daz dir bejaget den ungewin" ["there seems to be a sign on you as well which robs you of your gain"] (7494–96). In fact, we could find many other examples particularly in this and other heroic epics where the loss of blood and limbs hardly ever seems to matter and the protagonist unabashedly offers most shocking remarks as if all that would not have mattered.

Beginning above with some general definitions of sarcasm, we have realized that there are more types of sarcasm than meet the eye at first sight. The motivation by an individual to express his/her opinion in a sarcastic fashion could vary significantly. The power differential normally assumed to sustain sarcasm does not always surface as clearly as theoretical discussions have claimed. Most important, however, we have now sufficient evidence to identify the existence of sarcasm as a strong feature also in medieval German heroic epics and courtly romances. After all, when people enter a conversation, both in the past and in the present, bitter comments can easily be formulated. There is no reason to believe that medieval people did not know sarcasm, as our selection of literary texts illustrates abundantly. As we can conclude, however, sarcasm does not surface often, especially because of its bitter and biting tone and aggressive nature. When literary characters resort to sarcasm, then the human relationship has already soured or is about to explode into open hostility. Each time we have observed a case of sarcasm, the narrator or poet projected a complex and highly difficult condition in human life. The examples studied here thus confirm that already early medieval literature was characterized by a high degree of psychological sophistication.

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41 Stricker, *Karl der Grosse*, ed. Karl Bartsch. Deutsche Neudrucke. Reihe: Texte des Mittelalters (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1965), 198.



Elza C. Tiner

## Sarcasm and Heresy

### John Wyclif and the York *Fall of the Angels* Play

After the Black Death in the mid-fourteenth century, Europe and Britain faced several crises that involved challenges to an existing hierarchy or position of power: the Great Schism, in which the papacy split into factions; wars between England and France; the deposition of the English king, Richard II; the Peasants' Revolt of 1381; the arrest and execution of the Archbishop of York, Richard le Scrope, for treason in 1405; and the rise of John Wyclif and his followers, who challenged the power and wealth of the established Church and religious houses.

As M.G.A. Vale comments, "If the period from about 1370 to 1480 has any unity, this was created by multiple threats to the established Church—from the infidels on the frontiers of Europe, from the heretics within Europe, from the Councils, and, not least, from a laity which, at its upper social levels, was more literate and therefore better informed on matters of religious belief than ever before."<sup>1</sup> Against this backdrop of disruptions in the social and ecclesiastical order, biblical plays later known as the York Cycle were produced in the city of York. Coordinated by civic authorities and sponsored by the guilds in York, the cycle depicts biblical history from Creation to Last Judgment. It opens with *The Creation and Fall of the Angels* or, as it is titled in Richard Beadle's most recent edition of the plays, the EETS s.s. vols. 23 and 24, the *Fall of the Angels* (henceforth its title in this paper), assigned to the Barkers (Tanners) guild. This play sets up a striking contrast between obedience and order, in language expressing love and praise for God, and disobedience and discord, in the sarcastic words of the rebel angels who blame each other as they fall into the inferno. The dramatization of this narrative may be a late fourteenth-century warning about the dangers of attempting to take God's place, represented by the Church: the ultimate heresy. A leader of controversy in this period was the Oxford theologian John Wyclif, along with his followers, the Lollards. Sarcasm in the *Fall of the Angels* could be read as a warning *against* Lollard preaching.<sup>2</sup>

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1 M.G.A. Vale, "Piety, Charity and Literacy among the Yorkshire Gentry, 1370–1480," *Borthwick Papers* 50 (York: Borthwick Historical Institute, 1976), 2.

2 In *The Civic Cycles: Artisan Drama and Identity in Premodern England* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press), 41–61, Nicole R. Rice and Margaret Aziza Pappano argue that the York *Fall of the Angels*, put on by the Tanners Guild, represents the Tanners' reply to a long-standing dispute with their rivals, the Cordwainers (shoemakers), who, throughout the course of the fifteenth

In Donatus, *Ars Maior*, a standard school-text for instruction in Latin grammar during the Middle Ages, sarcasm is included among the forms of allegory, a trope, which he defines as “Allegoria est tropus, quo aliud significatur quam dicitur” [a word transferred from its proper signification to a likeness that is not proper to it for reasons of embellishment [*ornatus*] or necessity].<sup>3</sup> His definition of sarcasm follows: “Sarcasmos est plena odio atque hostilis inrisio, ut ‘en agros et quam bello, Troiane, petisti, Hesperiam metire iacens’” [Sarcasm is hostile derision full of hatred, as in “There! Lying down you can measure out, Trojan, the lands and Hesperia, which you tried to conquer through war”].<sup>4</sup> The example here is from *Aeneid* 12.359–361, where Turnus, destined for defeat by Aeneas, hurls sarcasm at Eumedes, a Trojan, whom Turnus has killed. The sarcasm signals—to the reader—that Turnus may be victorious now, but is soon to be on the losing end of the battle. In this context, Turnus is using sarcasm with hatred, “hostilis inrisio” [hostile derision], filled with pride, a sign of impending defeat. In the York *Fall of the Angels* play, this type of sarcasm is a sign of deadly sin in the angels who turn from God and on each other as they fall from heaven.

Another form of sarcasm employs indirect scorn in a scenario that mocks one who wields ineffective power, such as Isaiah 14:12–14, addressed to the king of Babylon, the basis for many later narratives of the fall of the angels. In a series of sarcastic rhetorical questions, the Prophet Isaiah asks Lucifer, the morning star, how he fell from the sky, he who had claimed that he would set his throne above the starry regions of God’s universe. In 14:14, the Prophet compares the king to Lucifer asserting that he will be equal to God, “Ascendam super altitudinem nubium / Similis ero Altissimo?” [“I will ascend above the

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century, staged public protests against their place in the Corpus Christi procession, including disruption of and refusal to participate in the Corpus Christi procession of torches that preceded the play. Rice and Pappano suggest that the York play depicts the Cordwainers as the devils that refuse to accept authority and try to control the “light” themselves. However, this interpretation does not negate the possibility that the play also speaks out against heresy. Whether heresy or guild rivalry, both types of contention are about challenges to the social order, mirrored in the sarcasm of the characters depicted losing the battle.

3 Aelius Donatus, *De tropis*, ed. Jim Marchand [James O’Donnell], *Corpus scriptorum latinorum: A Digital Library of Latin Literature* (2009): no. 17, <http://www.forumromanum.org/literature/donatusx.html>; “On Tropes,” *Ars Maior*, trans. Rita Copeland and Ineke Sluiter, in *Medieval Grammar and Rhetoric: Language Arts and Literary Theory, AD 300–1475* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), III.6, 97.

4 Donatus, *De tropis*, 17 f; trans. Copeland and Sluiter, *Ars Maior* III.6, 98.



height of the clouds, I will be like the most High?”<sup>5</sup> These questions are not only rhetorical; they are sarcastic in an allegorical sense. The Prophet is foretelling the deliverance of the people of Israel from the King of Babylon, who is analogous to Lucifer falling from heaven after having attempted to take or surpass God’s throne. In 14:15 the Prophet warns: “Verumtamen ad infernum detraheris, / In profundum laci.” [But yet thou shalt be brought down to hell, into the depth of the pit.] The sarcasm in the analogy with Lucifer sets up an allegorical mirror in which the king—and the Israelites—can see the futility of attempting to subvert God’s power.

Similarly, the York *Fall of the Angels* play warns its medieval audience of the dangers of attempting to subvert the celestial hierarchy. Here sarcasm occurs in two forms: 1) in the plot as allegory, in which Lucifer and his followers, prototypes of heretics, fall after his attempt to take God’s throne; and 2) in the language, hostile derision, among the angels turned devils. In 1988, Richard Beadle took up the problem of sources for the York *Fall of the Angels* in “Poetry, Theology and Drama in the York Creation and Fall of Lucifer,” where he notes that “the mystery cycles were probably without precedent in the portentous matter of presenting God in heaven on stage and depicting the first sinful act and the origin of evil in Lucifer’s rebellion.”<sup>6</sup>

Lauren Lepow makes a strong case that the *Towneley Plays* are counter-Lollard, that “it is most likely that their early coalescence overlapped the period of intense heretical activity in late fourteenth- and early fifteenth-century England. The plays and Lollardy—the heretical movement that grew out of the teachings of John Wyclif—were historical bedfellows.”<sup>7</sup> Additionally, some of the plays in the Towneley manuscript contain lines from the York cycle, and though the *Fall of the Angels* is not among these, Lepow’s argument suggests a parallel motive for their composition.<sup>8</sup> The career of this prominent Oxford theologian origi-

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5 *Biblia Sacra iuxta Vulgatam Clementinam*, ed. Alberto Colunga, O. P., and Laurentio Turrado (Madrid: Biblioteca de Autores Cristianos, 1977); translations are from *Douay-Rheims Bible + Challoner Notes* (DRBO.org, 2001–2013).

6 Richard Beadle, “Poetry, Theology and Drama in the York Creation and Fall of Lucifer,” in *Religion in the Poetry and Drama of the Late Middle Ages in England*, J. A. W. Bennett Memorial Lectures, Perugia, 1988, ed. Piero Boitani and Anna Torti (Woodbridge, Suffolk: D. S. Brewer/Rochester, NY: Boydell & Brewer, 1990), 215.

7 Lauren Lepow, *Enacting the Sacrament: Counter-Lollardy in the Towneley Cycle* (Rutherford: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press; London: Associated University Presses, 1990), 11–12.

8 On the Towneley plays borrowed from York, see Peter Meredith, “The Towneley Pageants,” *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle and Alan J. Fletcher, 2nd ed. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 164–167. For the date and compilation of the Towneley plays as an anthology rather than a cycle, see Alexandra F. Johnston, “English

nated in Yorkshire. His earliest teacher was John de Clervaux, rector of Wycliffe Church, on the manor belonging to the Duke of Lancaster, John of Gaunt. In 1351 Wyclif rose quickly through several lower ecclesiastical ranks: he was ordained subdeacon in March at St. Mary's in Yorkshire, then as deacon in April, and finally as priest by Archbishop William de la Zouche in September at York Minster.<sup>9</sup> He became a fellow at Merton College, Oxford, in 1356.<sup>10</sup> By 1360 he was a master at Balliol College, Oxford. This connection may be significant: according to his biographers Anne Hudson and Anthony Kenny, "Balliol had strong northern connections, and the influence of Archbishop John Thoresby of York (*d.* 1373) at this time on other members of the college may suggest that Wycliffe could have had similar affiliations."<sup>11</sup> In 1363 Wyclif returned to Oxford for theological studies, where he earned his bachelor's degree in theology in March 1369 and the doctorate by 1373. Over the course of his career he had various livings in Lincolnshire, Gloucestershire, Buckinghamshire and Leicestershire, though he spent most of his time at Oxford. However, his connections with Yorkshire and his growing reputation may well have alerted the city of York to be on guard against his teachings.

This fiery preacher gradually gained a reputation as a "vituperative critic of the papacy, the friars, and the fourteenth-century ecclesiastical status quo."<sup>12</sup> He was also a prolific writer, and despite the credit given to him for supporting the translation of the Bible into English, all of his surviving works are in Latin, though he makes reference to using English in his *Dialogus* IV.30 against the practice of friars providing letters of fraternity promising heavenly rewards in exchange for donations, "Placet de illis dicere in Latino, quod quondam expressi in Anglico" [It is good to speak of this in Latin, when otherwise I have spoken of this entirely in English], suggesting that he had been preaching on the topic to the laity.<sup>13</sup>

His attacks led to isolation from advancement in the ecclesiastical hierarchy, several encounters with the authorities regarding his teachings, and posthumous

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Biblical Drama," in *Routledge Research Companion to Early Drama and Performance*, ed. Pamela M. King (London: Routledge, 2017), 193–194

9 Stephen E. Lahey, *John Wyclif*. *Great Medieval Thinkers*, ed. Brian Davies (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 4–5.

10 Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 5.

11 Anne Hudson and Anthony Kenny, "Wyclif, John (*d.* 1384)," *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (Oxford University Press, 2004); online edn, Sept 2010. <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/30122>, accessed 30 Aug 2015; doi:10.1093/ref:odnb/30122.

12 Lahey, *John Wyclif*, 3.

13 Joannis Wiclif, *Dialogus cum supplemento trialogi*, ed. Gotthardus Lechler (Oxford: Clarendon, 1869), 349; Wyclif, *Dialogus*, trans. Lahey, 277.

condemnation for heresy. In 1376 he was summoned to appear before the king's council and in 1377 before Archbishop Simon Sudbury and bishops at St Paul's to answer charges of seditious preaching, his claims "that the pope's excommunication was invalid, and that any priest, if he had power, could pronounce release as well as the pope; that kings and lords cannot grant anything perpetually to the [C]hurch, since the lay powers can deprive erring clerics of their temporalities at any time; that temporal lords in need could legitimately remove the wealth of possessioners."<sup>14</sup> Also in 1377, the same year as the first mention of pageants for Corpus Christi at York, Pope Gregory XI alerted the ecclesiastical, royal, and academic authorities of his condemnation of the views of Wyclif; he was to be examined for heresy at Oxford or summoned to appear before the Pope:

On 22 May 1377 Gregory XI (r. 1370 – 78) issued five bulls condemning the views of John Wyclif, three to the archbishop of Canterbury and bishop of London, one to the king, and one to the chancellor of the University of Oxford. The first three exhort the ecclesiastical officials to inquire into Wyclif's activities and views, and, if this should prove difficult in Oxford, to cite Wyclif to appear in person before the pope within three months; the same officials should explain the problem to the king.<sup>15</sup>

By 1381, Wyclif's questioning of transubstantiation, i.e., his assertion that the Eucharist was nothing more than bread and wine, rather than the body and blood of Christ, came under attack, and finally, "At the Blackfriars Council of 1382, ten arguments were condemned as heretical, and fourteen as erroneous, the issues concerned ranging from the [C]hurch's temporalities and the powers of the pope to the sacraments of confession and the Eucharist."<sup>16</sup> Wyclif died in 1384. However, his reputation did not end there. By decree issued at the Council of Constance in 1415, his bones were exhumed, burnt, and his ashes thrown into the River Swift, but his ideas lived on, mainly through his theological writings and the followers that he had gathered. His teachings were thought to have encouraged the Peasants' Revolt of 1381, the introduction of burning at the stake as a punishment for heresy in 1401, and high treason in Sir John Oldcastle's attempted plot against Henry V in 1415.<sup>17</sup> It is, therefore, not unreasonable to believe that condemnation of his ideas influenced the drama of the north.

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<sup>14</sup> Hudson and Kenney, *DNB*.

<sup>15</sup> Hudson and Kenney, *DNB*.

<sup>16</sup> Dinah Birch, *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* (Oxford University Press, 2009), Oxford Reference.com.

<sup>17</sup> Lahey, *Dialogus*, intro., 1.

On the other hand, in “Staged Interpretations: Civic Rhetoric and Lollard Politics in the York Plays,” Ruth Nissé claims that the York Plays were influenced by Lollard ideas and that the characterizations of Christ’s accusers in the trial plays, where Jesus is brought by Annas and Caiaphas before Pilate and Herod, are “satirical treatments” of corrupt clergy.<sup>18</sup> Peter Happé’s research on the 1409 *Constitutions* of Archbishop Thomas Arundel (1353–1414), issued as an attempt to curb the spread of Lollardy, shows that these decrees did not stop the development of civic biblical drama, even though it was a form of preaching in the vernacular that the *Constitutions* attempted to suppress. Happé suggests that it was not possible to suppress Lollardy by enforcing the *Constitutions* throughout England and that certain “loopholes” remained in the form of vernacular biblical plays.<sup>19</sup> However, this assertion is problematic. Arundel’s *Constitutions* do not expressly prohibit dramatic activity. Constitution 9 specifies that traditional forms of worship, including veneration of the cross, processions, “and all other modes and forms whatsoever used in the times of us and our predecessors” are to be maintained.<sup>20</sup> It is therefore likely that Arundel was concerned, not about the Corpus Christi plays as potential instigators of Lollardy, but rather about correct preaching to the laity.

Archbishop John Thoresby (1352–1373) played a significant role in initiating an educational program in York designed for clergy to instruct the laity using language that they could understand. For example, John Pecham’s tract *Ignorancia Sacerdotum* urging such education was reissued by Archbishop Thoresby in

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**18** Ruth Nissé, “Staged Interpretations: Civic Rhetoric and Lollard Politics in the York Plays,” *Journal of Medieval and Early Modern Studies* 28.2 (Winter 1998): 429.

**19** Peter Happé, “Genre and Fifteenth-Century English Drama: The Case of Thomas Chaundler’s *Liber Apologeticus*,” *Medium Aevum* 82.1 (2013): 67.

**20** “The Arundelian Constitutions of 1408, against the Lollards,” in vol. 3 of *Concilia Magnae Britanniae et Hiberniae ab Anno MCCL ad Annum MDXLV*, ed. David Wilkins (London, 1737), 318. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/arundel.pdf>; *Archbishop Thomas Arundel’s Constitutions against the Lollards*, trans. John Johnson, revised by Michael Marlowe, Feb. 2012. <http://www.bible-researcher.com/arundel.html>.

The Latin reads: “sed ab omnibus deinceps communiter doceatur atque praedicetur, crucem et imaginem crucifixi, caeterasque imagines sanctorum, in ipsorum honorem et memoriam, quos figurant, ac ipsorum loca ac reliquias, processionibus, genuflexionibus, inclinationibus, thurificationibus, deosculationibus, oblationibus, luminarium accensionibus, et peregrinationibus, necnon aliis quibuscunque modis et formis, quibus nostris et praedecessorum nostrorum temporibus fieri consuevit.” [But let all henceforth preach up the veneration of the cross, and of the image of the crucifix, and other images of saints in memory and honour of them whom they resemble, and their places, and relics, with processions, genuflexions, bowings, incensings, kissings, oblations, pilgrimages, illuminations, and all other modes and forms whatsoever used in the times of us and our predecessors.]

1357, with an accompanying letter, later known as “The Lay Folk’s Catechism,” translated into English by Benedictine John Gaytrick from St. Mary’s Abbey in York.<sup>21</sup> While Stephen Lahey suggests that, because of his university training, Wyclif might have been involved in Archbishop Thoresby’s educational project, Wyclif’s growing dissatisfaction with the Church and religious houses as well as his rejection of transubstantiation led to a widening difference of opinions.<sup>22</sup> In her study of education in York, Jo Ann H. Moran finds evidence of potential Wycliffite activity in denunciation of clerical abuses there, though the examples are not numerous. However, this sermon, which must have contained very sarcastic language, might have set off cause for concern: “In 1372 and 1373 William of Rymington, Prior of Sawley Abbey and Chancellor of Oxford University, addressed the northern synod of clergy of York, delivering, according to G. R. Owst, ‘the darkest account of the Church and the fiercest denunciation of his fellow-clergy to be found in all English sermon literature.’”<sup>23</sup> These developments were taking place during the formative years of the York Cycle and the early version of the *Ordo paginarum*. Perhaps not coincidentally, the *Ordo paginarum* is dated 1415, the year in which, at the Council of Constance, Wyclif, though deceased, was formally declared a heretic, suggesting that there was concern in the Church about the continuing spread of his theological ideas.

In this context, the *Fall of the Angels* play becomes a warning to the enemies of Christ and the followers of Lucifer, accusations that Lollards have made against the friars in particular. The play answers their accusers. Abusive language reveals Christ’s enemies.<sup>24</sup> It is contrary to the civil discourse expected of members of a religious order and pious citizens. Those observing the rule of St. Augustine were to live in harmony, avoiding quarrels and disputes as well as harsh language. Moreover, if a brother were to insult another, he should

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21 Alexandra F. Johnston, “The York Cycle and the Libraries of York,” in *The Church and Learning in Later Medieval Society: Essays in Honour of R.B. Dobson. Proceedings of the 1999 Harlaxton Symposium*, ed. Caroline Barron and Jenny Stratford, Harlaxton Medieval Studies 11 (Donington: Shaun Tyas, 2002), 357–359.

22 See Lahey, “John Wyclif: Life and Works,” in Wyclif, *Dialogus*, trans. Stephen E. Lahey (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 7–8, and Jonathan Hughes, *Pastors and Visionaries: Religion and Secular Life in Late Medieval Yorkshire* (Woodbridge: Boydell & Brewer, 1988), 164–165.

23 Jo Ann H. Moran, “Education and Learning in the City of York 1300–1560,” *Borthwick Papers* 55 (York: Borthwick Historical Institute, 1979), 32.

24 See also Clifford Davidson and Sheila White, “Bullying in York’s Plays: A Psycho-Social Perspective,” in *Corpus Christi Plays at York: A Context for Religious Drama*, AMS Studies in the Middle Ages 30 (New York: AMS, 2013), 189–209.

be ready to forgive that person; all were to behave kindly toward others.<sup>25</sup> By contrast, like Lucifer and his followers, in the latter part of his *Dialogus* Wyclif shows no mercy toward those he criticizes. While he urges the clergy to live a life of poverty and purity, at the same time he hurls blame, calling them devils. By putting blame in the speech of those who fall from heaven, illustrated in their transformation into devils, the York *Fall of the Angels* warns its audience not to use or to be deceived by such language.

Moreover, evidence for the development of the York Cycle survives from years significant for clerical resistance to Wyclif's preaching. In the surviving manuscript, BL Additional MS 35290, the York Cycle consists of 47 plays.<sup>26</sup> The manuscript, also called the Register, is the official copy of the plays, which were kept by the Common Clerk of the city.<sup>27</sup> Though the manuscript was compiled in 1477, these plays probably existed in some form as early as the last quarter of the fourteenth century. The earliest indication that there might have been some kind of dramatic activity on the Feast of Corpus Christi in York is from an entry dated 1377 in the *A/Y Memorandum Book*, f. 4v, also kept by the Common Clerk, recording payment of two shillings for annual storage of three "pagine Corporis christi."<sup>28</sup> In 1415, the *Ordo paginarum*, the earliest list of plays performed on Corpus Christi, was entered into the *A/Y Memorandum Book*, followed by a proclamation of the play to be made on the night before Corpus Christi.<sup>29</sup> According to Beadle, this list "resembles in many particulars what was set down in the manuscript some sixty years later."<sup>30</sup> The entry for this play is in the earliest hand of the document, that of Roger Burton, Common Clerk of York 1415–1436, evidence that it existed in some form by the early fifteenth century.<sup>31</sup> The plays were performed on wagons, which stopped at specific stations

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25 Aubrey Gwynn, *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif* (London: Oxford University Press, 1940), 6.

26 Beadle, *York Plays* 1: xii. On compilation in 1477, see Beadle, "Nicholas Lancaster, Richard of Gloucester and the York Corpus Christi Play," in *The York Mystery Plays: Performance in the City*, ed. Margaret Rogerson (York: York Medieval Press, 2011), 31–52.

27 Beadle, *York Plays* 1: xii–xviii.

28 Beadle *York Plays* 1: xix. For the entry see *York*, edited by Alexandra F. Johnston and Margaret Rogerson, *Records of Early English Drama* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1979) 1: 3, hereafter REED *York*. For revision of date of this document from 1376 to 1377, see Beadle, *York Plays* 1: n24, xix.

29 See REED *York* 1: 16–25.

30 Beadle, *York Plays* 1: xix.

31 See Richard Beadle and Peter Meredith, "Introduction (*A/Y Memorandum Book*)" in *The York Play: A Facsimile of British Library MS Additional 35290 Together with a Facsimile of the Ordo Paginarum section of the A/Y Memorandum Book*. Intro. Richard Beadle and Peter Meredith;

around the city on the Feast of Corpus Christi, sixty days after Easter. During 1377 Wyclif was summoned and examined and, in 1415, posthumously condemned as a heretic. According to the Church, one of Wyclif's most egregious errors was the denial of transubstantiation, the focal point of the Feast of Corpus Christi.

From its inception, this Feast laid the foundations for public worship such as processions and plays designed to inspire devotion and ward off heresy. Juliana (c. 1192–1258), prioress of Mount Corillon, Liège, France, initiated the addition of Corpus Christi to the ecclesiastical calendar.<sup>32</sup> In the latter half of the thirteenth century celebration of this feast spread to other communities, gradually gained support, and was formally established for the entire Church on 11 August 1264 by Pope Urban IV in the bull *Transiturus de hoc mundo*.<sup>33</sup> In a second version of this bull sent to Henry, Bishop of Liege, and others in September of 1264, Urban IV specifically states that the purpose of this feast is “to counteract the madness and faithlessness of heretics.”<sup>34</sup> The use of plays for spiritual direction on Corpus Christi is mentioned in a 1422 entry in the York *A/Y Memorandum Book*, where the Painters and Stainers request that their pageant be combined with that of the Pinners and Latteners. The document begins by referring to the reason why the plays were instituted: “Nouit ille qui nichil ignorat & plebs conqueritur vniversa quod ludus in die corporis christi in ista ciuitate cuius institutio ob magnam deuocionis causam & viciorum extirpacionem morumque reformatiōnem antiquitus facta fuit...” [He who is ignorant of nothing knows, and the whole people lament, that the play on the day of Corpus Christi in this city, *the institution of which was made of old for the important cause of devotion and for the extirpation of vice and the reformation of customs...*]<sup>35</sup> It is therefore possible that the plays performed on the feast of Corpus Christi in York were designed not only to educate the laity, but also to warn them about the dangers of heretical beliefs.

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note on the music by Richard Rastall, Leeds Texts and Monographs, Medieval Drama Facsimiles VII, ed. A. C. Cawley and Stanley Ellis (Leeds: University of Leeds School of English, 1983), li-lix and Meg Twycross, “The *Ordo paginarum* Revisited, with a Digital Camera,” in “*Bring furth the pagants*”: Essays in Early English Drama Presented to Alexandra F. Johnston, ed. David N. Klausner and Karen Sawyer Marsalek, Studies in Early English Drama 9, ed. J. A. B. Somerset (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2007), 105–131.

32 See Barbara H. Walters, “The Feast and its Founder,” in *The Feast of Corpus Christi*, ed. Barbara H. Walters, Vincent J. Corrigan, and Peter T. Ricketts (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 2006), 3–54.

33 Walters, 11–15, 30–33; see also Thomas M. Izbicki, *The Eucharist in Medieval Canon Law* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 221–245.

34 Quoted in Walters et al, 34.

35 REED *York* 1: 37; trans. Abigail Young, REED *York* 2: 722, emphasis in italics mine.



The *Fall of the Angels* tells a popular story with a long history from antiquity to the later Middle Ages, that of Lucifer's attempt to take God's throne at the start of creation and his subsequent fall into hell. It illustrates the kind of behavior occurring when weak, insecure leaders, often usurpers, attempt to hold onto power that they fear, and often are, losing. Symptomatic of the weakness of such leaders is their utterance of abusive, sarcastic language, often on the way out of power, like the rebel angels' name-calling and fighting one another as they are cast out of heaven at the start of creation. By contrast, in the play, the characters who hold power rightfully, God and the good angels, speak words of praise, joy, and love. Thus this play warns its audience in English, language that they can understand, of the consequences of attempting to assume power, subverting the hierarchy established by God, or, by extension, the Church. In this way, the play functions allegorically, as a kind of mirror reflecting the consequences of schisms, uprisings, and subversions, including heresy. In this context, the language of the rebel angels illustrates how sarcasm, in the form of hostile insults, is a sign of sin, broken pride turned into anger.

The play makes this point in the form of a disputation. According to R.W. Hanning, the alternating stanzas of the good and bad angels in this play do not fit the usual expectations for dialogue, choric strophes, or formal debate.<sup>36</sup> In a university disputation on a theological question, such as a *quodlibet*, the master poses a question, disputants in turn present their sides to the response to the question, and the master decides the outcome in a closing determination. Alex J. Novikoff traces the development of dialogues and disputations in medieval education to their incorporation in music, poetry, and performance. Disputations were common pedagogical techniques not only in universities, but also in the *studia* of religious houses, and were very much public performances in preparation for preaching to the laity.<sup>37</sup> For example, the Augustinians required disputations in their schools, as illustrated in the 1357 letter of Prior General Gregorio da Rimini to the Augustinian convent at Avignon:

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36 R. W. Hanning, "'You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye': The Nature and Limits of Dramatic Mimesis as a Theme in Four Middle English 'Fall of Lucifer' Cycle Plays," *Comparative Drama* 7.1 (1973): 40.

37 Alex J. Novikoff, *Medieval Culture of Disputation: Pedagogy, Practice, and Performance*, The Middle Ages Series, ed. Ruth Mazo Karras and Edward Peters (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2013). See also *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages: The Thirteenth Century*, ed. Christopher Schabel, Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 7, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 2006); and *Theological Quodlibeta in the Middle Ages: The Fourteenth Century*. Ed. Christopher Schabel. Brill's Companions to the Christian Tradition 7, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 2007).



Item venerabilem magistrum regentem et lectores conventus exhortamur et monemus, ac etiam eisdem mandamus districte, quatenus circa profectum studencium diligentem curam adhibeant, continuando scilicet tam lectiones quam disputationes cotidianas et ad easdem ipsos sollicitando studentes, ex quibus, si quos adverterint negligentes et desides, faciant addicionem que contra tales loquitur observari, inhibentes prefato venerabili magistro, ac etiam aliis magistris quibuscunque, ne tempore cotidianarum disputationum aliquos studentes secum in mensis detineant aut aliter occupent quominus ipsis studentes possint eiusmodi disputationibus interesse.

[Likewise we urge and warn the venerable regent master and lectors of the convent, and even strictly order the same that they employ diligent care regarding the progress of the students, namely by conducting daily lectures as well as disputations and by exhorting the students, from among whom, if they should notice any negligent or lazy, they should make an announcement which is said to be observed against such, admonishing the afore-said venerable master, and also any other masters, at the time of daily disputations not to detain or otherwise occupy some students with them at the tables so that the students are not able to be present at the disputations of this kind themselves.]<sup>38</sup>

As a disputation, the *Fall of the Angels* both preaches and teaches, while dramatizing the result of attempting to subvert the heavenly hierarchy. It presents a moral lesson on obedience to God and the Church as the right path to eternal salvation. Following God's opening speech, though there is not a stated question, the debate turns on whether it is possible for an angel to take God's place; good and bad angels present their sides; and God settles the argument, which solution the falling angels demonstrate, followed by God's exposition in lines 129–160. The statement that Lucifer challenges is in line 40 at the end of God's opening speech, when he appoints Lucifer as the leader of the angels, "Ay-whils 3he ar buxumly berande" [As long as you are behaving obediently (*buxumly*)]. As Hanning points out, this is the conclusion to a lesson: "The York play's God is neither the unnoticing victor of [Towneley] nor the hurt parent of Chester, but a teacher commenting on his method and plans to an obedient pupil who perceives them with new understanding."<sup>39</sup>

While the good angels address their master in praise, Lucifer ignores God and praises himself. He is talking to himself, as if *he* were God, and to anyone who will listen and follow him. While I Angelus, Seraphyn begins "A, mercyfull maker, full mekill es þi mighte" [O, merciful creator, your power is very great] (41), I Angelus Deficiens, Lucifere exclaims "All the myrth þat es made es mar-

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38 Gregorio da Rimini, *Gregorii de Arimino O.S.A. Registrum generalatus 1357–1358*, ed. Alberic de Meijer, *Fontes historiae Ordinis Sancti Augustini*, Prima Series: Registra priorum generalium (Roma: Institutum Historicum Augustinianum, 1976), 11; my translation.

39 Hanning, "You Have Begun a Parlous Pleye," 43.

kide in me!” [All the mirth that is made is represented in me] (49).<sup>40</sup> The two angels that speak next support the opposing sides of their leaders. Angelus Cherabyn starts off his stanza expressing love for God, “Lorde, wyth a lastande luf we loue þe allone” [Lord, with everlasting love we praise you alone] (57), but the next speaker, II Angelus Deficiens, does not even bother to praise Lucifer; he just takes up self-praise in imitation, “O, what I am fetys and fayre and fygured full fytt” [O, how gorgeous I am, fair and fit in form] (65). The effect of this language is comic, causing the audience to laugh, perhaps with a bit of hostile derision, at their inflated bombast. Thus the rebel angels fall, taken down by their own self-praise, having turned from God.

The first time the devils speak directly to other characters is in the inferno, when II Diabilus [sic], formerly II Angelus Deficiens, curses Lucifer sarcastically, “Owte on þe, Lucifer, lurdan, oure lyghte has þou lorne” [Damn you, Lucifer, fool, you have lost our light] (108). He makes no mention of God; he just blames Lucifer for causing them to fall. The dialogue here is filled with the kind of sarcasm that emanates from anger, hostility. Though not metaphoric, it is similar to Turnus’s attitude in the example that Donatus provides. After complaining about his situation, Lucifer finally addresses his fellow devil. He retorts bitterly, excusing himself rather than acknowledging that he did anything wrong, “Vnthryuandely threpe 3he—I sayde but a thoghte” [You threaten in vain—I said but a thought] (114).<sup>41</sup> II Diabolus also refuses to admit any mistakes; he just copies Lucifer’s pattern: “We, lurdane, þou lost vs” (115). Lucifer replies, accusing him of lying. They continue to argue at each other until the dispute erupts in blows, “We, lurdans, haue at 3owe, lat loke!” [Whoa, fools, take this, look out!] (120). Finally, Angelus Cherubyn comments, beginning with praise and love of God, the reason why Lucifer fell, and the point of this demonstration, “The cause I se itt in syghte, / Wharefore to bale he is broghte” [I see the reason before my eyes / Why he is sent to hell] (127–128).

As master, God concludes the lesson by pointing out where they went wrong:

Those foles for þaire fayrehede in fantasyes fell,  
And hade mayne of mi mighte þat marked þam and made þam.  
Forthi efter þaire warkes were, in wo sall þai well,  
For sum ar fallen into fylthe þat euermore sall fade þam,  
And neuer sall haue grace for to gyrrh þam.

<sup>40</sup> Translations of the Middle English are my own; see also *The York Plays: A Modernization*, trans. Chester N. Scoville and Kimberley M. Yates (Toronto, 2003), <http://groups.chass.utoronto.ca/plspls/wp-content/uploads/2015/09/york.html>

<sup>41</sup> See also Beadle’s note on the theological implications of the angels’ expression of thought in *York Plays* 2: 7.

So passande of power tham thoght þam,  
 Thai wolde noght me worschip þat wroghte þam;  
 Forþi sall my wreth euer go with þam. (129–136)

[Those fools for their fairness fell into fantasies,  
 And envied my power that designed and made them.  
 Therefore, according to their works, they will dwell in woe,  
 For some have fallen into filth that forever will fade them,  
 And they will never have grace to protect them.  
 So superior in power they thought themselves  
 That they would not worship me who made them;  
 Therefore, my wrath will go with them forever.]

God then concludes his speech by explaining that he will proceed with his work of creation. The contrasting language with emphasis on *lurdans* and *foles* echoes the culture of a medieval school where those who fail to learn their lessons or misbehave are punished, often by flogging.

During the latter years of his life, Wyclif wrote a philosophical dialogue, the *Trialogus*, in which he explains the nature of God, the created world, virtues and vices in Books I–III. He takes off in another direction in Book IV, where he damns the mendicant orders in the bitterest language. It is here that his language turns sarcastic as Donatus defines sarcasm, filled with hostile contempt, scorn. Wyclif also invokes allegory when he characterizes members of the Church hierarchy as followers of Lucifer, fallen angels. In the voice of the master Phronesis, he accuses friars of three main heresies: belief in the Eucharist as real presence of Christ (which he claims is not the body and blood of Christ, just bread and wine); mendicancy (a form of greed); and letters of fraternity, asserting that the friars are working for the Devil. In a supplement, he attacks the right of the Church to amass wealth from endowments. Perhaps out of frustration with the Great Schism, he includes a chapter headed, “Papam esse fontem nequitiae omnis in ecclesia vigentis” [The pope is the font of all iniquity in the [C]hurch].<sup>42</sup> Here he predicts that “Et tunc ista duo monstra cum membris diaboli sibi adhaerentibus sese destruerent, ecclesia fidelium stante salva” [Then these two monsters with their diabolical members will destroy one another and all those who adhere to them, with the [C]hurch of the faithful alone saved].<sup>43</sup> Although he says that Clement VII is the greater of the two evils, rather than Urban VI, we should believe “quod nullus talis papa necessarius est per ordinationem

42 “Supplementum trialogi sive de dotatione ecclesiae,” Ch. 4, ed. Lechler, 402; trans. Lahey, viii.

43 “Supplementum,” ed. Lechler, 426; trans. Lahey, 334.

Christi, sed per cautelam diaboli introductus" [that no pope is necessary by Christ's ordering, but has been introduced by the Devil].<sup>44</sup> Regarding the monastic orders, Wyclif says that they deceive and defraud the people, and "luciferine praesumunt regulas universales tradere quibuscunque, quos ordines illi voluerint decipiendo inducere" [flushed with Satan's pride they presume to hand over the universal rules in any which manner, through orders in which they have wanted to lead through deception].<sup>45</sup> Such accusations, describing the pope as the source of all evil, a monster and follower of Lucifer, along with monks and friars, use directly hostile, quarrelsome language, which the devils in the York Play use freely. In a tirade of sarcastic language, Wyclif is depicting the Church authorities and religious orders as fallen angels in the latter half of the *Trialogus*.

It would therefore not be surprising if clergy were responsible for the plays and one of them produced a warning, both lesson and sarcastic mirror, in the allegorical disputation of the first play. Alexandra Johnston has suggested that the York plays were quite possibly composed at the Augustinian Friary in York, given its large library and *studium concursorium* that provided the equivalent of a university education in theology.<sup>46</sup> Wyclif initially had friends and supporters from the Augustinian order, though they later parted ways with him, after he published attacks on the friars and denied transubstantiation.<sup>47</sup> According to R. B. Dobson, "it was also while disputing at 'the Augustinian schools' at Oxford in the spring of 1380 that John Wyclif was informed of the condemnation of his teachings by a university committee which included six friars among its twelve members."<sup>48</sup>

The Augustinian friars originated in 1256 as a mendicant order with mission to provide pastoral care, including preaching to the laity and hearing confes-

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<sup>44</sup> "Supplementum," ed. Lechler, 426; trans. Lahey, 335.

<sup>45</sup> "Supplementum," Ch. 5, ed. Lechler, 430; trans. Lahey, 337.

<sup>46</sup> Johnston, "The York Cycle and the Libraries of York," 362–366. For the library catalogue of the Austin Friars, compiled in 1372, see *The Friars' Libraries*. Corpus of British Medieval Library Catalogues, ed. K. W. Humphries (London: British Library/British Academy, 1990), 11–154.

<sup>47</sup> See Gwynn, *The English Austin Friars in the Time of Wyclif*, especially Part II, Chapter IV, "The Augustinian Theory of Lordship and Grace," 59–73; Part III, Chapter II, "Archbishop FitzRalph and the Friars," 80–89; and Part V, "Wyclif and the Friars at Oxford and Cambridge," 225–239; and Francis Roth, O.S.A., *The English Austin Friars 1249–1538*, Cassiciacum: Studies in St. Augustine and the Augustinian Order VI, Vol. 1 (New York: Augustinian Historical Institute, 1966), 65–66, 80–90. Several Austin friars participated in the Council at Blackfriars on 17–21 May 1381, at which 24 conclusions of Wyclif were condemned. See Roth, Vol. 2, 220.

<sup>48</sup> "The Religious Orders 1370–1540," in *The History of the University of Oxford*, Vol 2. *Late Medieval Oxford*, ed. J. I. Catto and Ralph Evans (Oxford: Clarendon, 1992), 564.

sions. By 1259, a convent was established in Paris, and by the fourteenth century, an English province of Augustinian houses had formed, divided into four “limits.” The one at York included the whole of northern England.<sup>49</sup> The central convent of each of these regions had a theological school. The topmost rank of such schools was the *studium generale*, usually at a university such as Oxford or Cambridge; the next level, the *studium concursorium*, such as the one at York, functioned as a kind of provincial *studium generale*. Moreover, spiritual instruction was to be offered to the laity, according to a letter from Guglielmo da Cremona (d. 1356) “sent to all the provinces of the order immediately after he became prior general at the general chapter of 1326 in in Florence.”<sup>50</sup> He ordered that

ipsis iuvenibus et laicis omnibus in conuentibus maioribus existentibus, omnibus diebus dominicis et in maioribus solempnitatibus fiat predicatio post matutinum immediate in capitulo vel in ecclesia per aliquem fratrem sufficientem ad hoc qui a priore fuerit ordinatus, vt et audientes secundum Deum proficiant et qui predicant exercitatiores reddantur.

[on every Sunday and in the major feasts, immediately after matins, preaching be done in the chapter or the church to all the youths and the lay people in the major convents by a brother capable of this job who will have been appointed by the prior, so that hearers may make progress according to God and so that those who preach may get more practice.]<sup>51</sup>

By the mid-fourteenth century, Augustinian preaching was to take place in language that a popular audience could comprehend. On 17 September 1357, Prior General Gregorio da Rimini sent a mandate to the Augustinian convent at Avignon ordering that they provide regular preaching to the laity in the vernacular at least once a month:

Item ut populus istius civitatis eo numerosior et fervencior ad ecclesiam nostram conveniat ut audiat verbum Dei, quo a doctioribus et pericioribus speraverit edoceri, volumus et ordinamus ut quilibet venerabilium magistrorum in sacra teologia, cui popularis predicacionis Deus gratiam contulit, quolibet mense saltem semel debeat populo vulgariter predicare.

[Likewise so that the public of that city should gather more numerous and eagerly at our church to hear the word of God, by which it will have hoped to be taught by the more learned and expert (preachers), we desire and order that whoever of the venerable masters

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49 Yuichi Akae, *A Mendicant Sermon Collection from Composition to Reception: The Novum opus dominicale of John Waldeby*, OESA (Turnhout: Brepols, 2015), 62–63.

50 Akae, *Mendicant Sermon Collection*, 56.

51 “Littere prioris generalis Fratris Guillelmi de Cremona: I. Ordinationes pro reparatione Ordinis,” ed. Eustasio Esteban, *Analecta Augustiniana* 4 (1911–12), 31; trans. Akae, *Mendicant Sermon Collection*, 59.

in sacred theology to whom God has granted the grace of popular preaching, at least once a month should preach to the public in the vernacular.]<sup>52</sup>

Moreover, there is evidence that Augustinians at York were preaching in English. One of the donors to the library of the Augustinian Friary was John Waldeby (d. 1370s), a professor of theology who wrote sermons in both Latin and English and who was appointed confessor by Thoresby.<sup>53</sup> By 1354, John Waldeby was regent master in theology of the Augustinian *studium concursorium* at York, where he may have composed his collection of sermons, the *Novum opus dominicale*. According to Yuichi Akae, who has recently published a detailed study of Waldeby's life and works, he probably composed these sermons between 1354, when he received his doctoral degree in theology, and 1372, when the library catalogue at the Augustinian Friary at York was drawn up.<sup>54</sup> The audience for these sermons included students at the friary, laity, and preachers who needed to prepare sermons.<sup>55</sup> One of the manuscripts of Waldeby's sermons, Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS. Laud 77, in a fifteenth-century hand, contains verses in English to translate Latin phrasing, and, according to Margaret Morrin, "it was not uncommon for whole sermons to be preached in vernacular rhyming couplets to facilitate the memory."<sup>56</sup>

Pamela King has identified a correlation between the sequence of plays in the York Cycle and the liturgical calendar which suggests that the plays might have been conceived as a series of visual sermons. The theme that just follows *The Fall of the Angels*, the Creation, occurs in the Breviary Lesson for Septuagesima Sunday, two and half weeks before Ash Wednesday.<sup>57</sup> The gospel reading for that Sunday is Matthew 20:1–16, on the parable of the laborers in the vineyard, and though it does not explicitly mention the fall of the angels, the

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52 Gregorio da Rimini, *Registrum generalatus 1357–1358*, 9; my translation. See also Akae, *Mendicant Sermon Collection*, 55. However, Akae's translation omits the reference to masters in theology: "those to whom the grace of preaching has been given by God are under obligation to carry out the ministry; on a monthly basis at least, they must preach to the faithful in the vernacular."

53 Johnston, "The York Cycle and the Libraries of York," 359.

54 Akae, *Mendicant Sermon Collection*, 43–44. In the Augustinian Friary catalogue it is listed as *Novum opus doctrinale*. See *The Friars' Libraries*, ed. Humphries, A8, nos. 557, 559, pp. 140–141.

55 Akae, *Mendicant Sermon Collection*, 70–79.

56 Margaret J. Morrin, "John Waldeby, O.S.A., c. 1315–c. 1372, English Augustinian Preacher and Writer with a Critical Edition of his Tract on the 'Ave Maria,'" *Studia Augustiniana Historica* 2; rpt. *Analecta Augustiniana* 35 (1972), 60.

57 See Pamela King, "Liturgical Index," in *The York Mystery Cycle and the Worship of the City*. Westfield Medieval Studies 1, ed. Rosamund Allen (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2006), 220.

theme of heavenly reward for those who worship God vs. those who turn away is similar to the division of the angels in the play. Waldeby's sermon for this Sunday also makes a strong point about quarrelsome language as a sign of sin. It contrasts those who worship God and do their work accordingly with those who turn away, toward a life of sin. Moreover, Waldeby makes reference to the kind of language that invites Christ in or shuts him out: "tria sunt que hominem expellunt de domo sua, i.e., fumus, mulier litigiosa, et stillicidium, sic spiritualis fumus delectacionis animam obfuscantis, mulier litigiosa, i.e., peccatum in lingua, et stillicidium mali operis Christum de domo anime expellunt." [There are three things that drive a man from his house, i.e., smoke, a quarrelsome woman, and a leaky roof; thus the spiritual smoke of pleasure clouding the soul; the quarrelsome woman, i.e., sin in speech; and the leaky roof of poor workmanship drive Christ from the house of the soul.].<sup>58</sup> In the *Fall of the Angels* play, "peccatum in lingua" [sin in speech] takes the form of hostile derision and insults.

God's opening speech in the *Fall of the Angels*, emphasizes "warke"[work] and God as the way to "welth" [wealth], echoing the themes of labor and reward in Waldeby's sermon. God is the source of ultimate power, "all mighte es in me," and life and wealth, "I am lyfe and way vnto welth-wynning" (2–3). God is also the ultimate worker, the master, and those who do his work will be rewarded. God identifies himself as "maker vnmade" [unmade maker, the Creator] (2), who has "wroght" [built] (13) a "place full of plenté" [a place full of prosperity] (12) that will contain "dyuers doynges" [various activities] (14). His "warke" is to produce "all" "of noght" [everything from nothing] (16). He warns the listeners that only those who "warke" his will "worthely" [follow his directions well] will receive his reward, power, "sall enspyre þe mighte of me" [will inspire God's power] (18). Like the sermon, these lines clearly speak to the tradespeople from the guilds in York and their customers listening to the play. Sarcasm in the devils' speech indicates the deadly sin of hatred, as well as that of sloth, suggested by the term "lurdan," a lazy fool who does not do his school or guild work properly. Thus the language in the play speaks to a dual audience: the students in the theological schools and the workers in the guilds, many involved in producing and/or watching the plays.

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<sup>58</sup> From "Dominica in Septuagesima," in John Waldeby, O.S.A., *Novum Opus Dominicale or Postille Iohannis Waldeby Eboracensis. Transcribed from two Bodleian Manuscripts*, ed. Michael S. Woodward (Villanova: Augustinian Historical Institute, 2005), 3. Special thanks are expressed to Darren G. Poley, Theology & Humanities Librarian, and Curator of the Augustinian Historical Institute, Falvey Memorial Library, Villanova University, Villanova, PA, for sending a reproduction.

Before indulging in his own brand of sarcasm, hostile derision and insults, complete with allegory aimed at the Church, Wyclif also takes up the narrative of the fall of the angels in his dialogue *Trialogus*. There he first explains why he has chosen the dialogue form: it is entertaining, pleasing, and also persuasive. While it does not include dialogue between angels and demons before God, his entire treatise, including the section on the fall of the angels, is a series of disputations between two students: Alithia, a *solidus philosophus*, or “solid philosopher,” and Pseustis, an *infidelis captiosus*, or “unfaithful believer.” Their instructor, Phronesis, is a *subtilis theologicus et maturus*, “a subtle and mature theologian.” The prologue explains the value of dialogue in addressing an audience, probably derived from instructional practices in the medieval schools and universities. This explanation may explain why dramatic dialogue came to be applied to biblical instruction:

Cum locutio ad personam multis plus complacet quam locutio generalis, et mens multorum qui afficiuntur singularibus, ex tali locutione acuitur, videri posset multis utilis quidam *Trialogus*, ubi primo tanquam *Alithia* solidus philosophus loquerentur, secundo infidelis captiosus tanquam *Pseustis* objiceret, et tertio subtilis theologicus et maturus tanquam *Phronesis* decideret veritatem.

[It is more pleasing to speak to an audience of many people who desire more than common talk, and it is more influential to the minds of all those who need more than a single voice, whose minds are sharpened by dialogue; so it is suitable to make use of a “Triologue,” where first one named Alithia speaks solid philosophy, then a second fallacious unbeliever named Pseustis makes objections, and a third subtle and mature theologian named Phronesis leads the discussion to the truth.]<sup>59</sup>

In the *Trialogus* II.10, Alithia asks Phronesis about the nature of the angels, and he explains, defining their organization into three hierarchies, divided into three orders each, with God presiding over the whole. After an extended discourse on the ability of the angels to move, in II.10 – 11, in II.12, Pseustis asks how it is possible for an angel to become evil and how it is possible for good angels to fight with evil ones. Furthermore, he is puzzled as to how an angel could be so stupid as to believe himself equal to God in power, when even man knows that he could not be such. Phronesis then gets into a discussion how the angels attained knowledge, using time and medieval optics for comparison. He says that angels have twofold knowledge of God, through “vision of the Word” and “knowledge in its proper genus.” He then defines such knowledge in terms of times of the day, where “Vision of the Word” is “dawn knowledge,” and “confirmation of angelic knowledge” is that of midday, and “knowledge of things in their proper genus” is

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59 Wyclif, *Trialogus*, ed. Lechler, 38; trans. Lahey 38.



“evening knowing.” By analogy, humankind understands things both intuitively and by sight, or vision, which includes reflection and refraction. He then says that the angels who fell started out with a clear knowledge of the Word at the start of creation, but during the first day gradually lost understanding, as well as belief, or faith, and did not offer God the praise that was due to him. They became hardened in their sin and did not expect punishment.

Phronesis concludes the argument by saying that the demons do not believe in God, but rather in their own pride, and in that condition, unpunished, persist in believing that they can be equal to God. Then he again stops and marvels that the fallen angels did not use their knowledge and vision, which they had from the start, to praise and worship God. Finally, he concludes that their fall was their own fault, due to their negligence in turning their wills to God. They became so hardened in their attitudes that they, essentially, sent themselves to hell. Wyclif resolves the problem of why and how the angels fell: they turned from God in pride. Later in his book, he applies this thinking to his invectives against clergy, especially friars, who hold ecclesiastical power and wealth.

Just as Wyclif applies this allegory to his opponents in *Triologus* Books III and IV, the York *Fall of the Angels* play dramatizes it not only in contrastive action, but also in language. From the perspective of traditional Catholic Church doctrine, through his attacks on the Church hierarchy, religious houses, and the sacrament of the bread and wine, plus assertions that none of these are needed to follow Christ, ironically, Wyclif became, as it were, a fallen angel, dragging his followers with him into the heresies leading to hell. His denial of transubstantiation strikes at the very heart, the central sacred concept, of the festival on which the plays were performed. It is thus very possible that the York Cycle, beginning with the *Fall of the Angels*, was a sarcastic “mirror” in the form of a city-wide theological defense against the threat of Wycliffite heresy in addition to other forms of civic disorder. As such the play “replies” to the challenge that Lucifer puts forward, that he is capable of taking God’s throne. It does so not only visually, through the action in the play, but also through the language, which defeats itself as the devils mock and blame one another, accusing each other of deception, the very charge that Wyclif attempts to lay on the Church and religious orders. In this way the play becomes a mirror, sarcastically reflecting those who practice the ways of false power and pride.



Scott O’Neil

## Lorenzo Valla’s “Intellectual Violence”

### Personal Feuds and Appropriated Sarcasm

On August 26, 1434, Lorenzo Valla received a letter from his fellow educator and friend, Maffeo Vegio.<sup>1</sup> In this letter, Vegio expressed shock and claimed to have fallen speechless when he heard about Valla’s current project—a new dialectic that would “radically depart” from the one established by Aristotle and “the ancients.” Taking great pains to reassure Valla of his continued esteem, Vegio simultaneously urged caution, imploring Valla to remember “quas olim inimicitias, que odia tibi excitasti”<sup>2</sup> [“the enemies you have made in the past, the grudges you have incited.”]<sup>3</sup> Ultimately, Vegio tells his friend to exercise more caution and “compesce hoc nimium acumen tuum, tuam hanc, ut ita dixerim, ingenii violentiam” [“keep in check that excessive sharpness of yours, and what I may call your intellectual violence.”]<sup>4</sup> The fact that Valla received such a warning from a friend should come as no surprise. As Vegio noted, Valla had offended before he decided to challenge Aristotle’s work, and he wasn’t exactly apologetic about his attempts to replace Aristotle’s dialectic with his own. In fact, he routinely suggested that his challenge to Aristotle was more of an “homage to the fiercely independent philosopher who rejected the teachings of his master, Plato.”<sup>5</sup>

Perhaps Valla’s best-known offense was his biting sarcastic attack on the dubious Donation of Constantine. While Valla’s philological exposure of the fraudulent nature of the Donation ruffled more than a few papal feathers, it was the 16<sup>th</sup>-century/Reformation use of the text—particularly by Martin Luther—that

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1 Lorenzo Valla, *Lorenzo Valla: Correspondence*, ed. and trans. Brendan Cook (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2013).

2 At the suggestion of a reviewer, I have included both Valla’s original Latin and the English translation, where possible. These translations are not my own, but those of Brendan Cook and G.W. Bowersock in their I Tatti editions of Valla’s *Correspondence* and *On the Donation of Constantine* respectively. One Valla passage, taken from the Proemium to his *Elegantiae*, was sourced from an edition that included only the English translation, so in that one instance, the Latin text is not included. In section 6, I utilize several passages from Martin Luther, translated by Preserved Smith and Tryntje Helfferich. These monographs did not include the original German language text—nor, quite honestly, would I have been able to make sense of it if they had included the German text—so only the English translation is included in this chapter.

3 Valla, *Correspondence*, 35.

4 Valla, *Correspondence*, 35–37.

5 Valla, *Correspondence*, xviii.

made it notorious. It is my contention, building primarily on the work of David M. Whitford, that Luther took the most vitriolic elements from Valla as an assault on the *office* of the pope, when the most vitriolic sarcasm was actually aimed at non-papal sources. Valla's text contains several layers of sarcasm, with some being overt—such as his rhetorical attacks on the unknown forger—and others being more covert or subtextual—with these being aimed specifically at one pope, Eugenius IV. Valla's overt sarcasm made the text quite appealing to Reformation leaders in general and Luther in particular.

Valla's biting sarcasm—so appealing in England and Germany when it arrived—was not particularly unusual for mid-15<sup>th</sup>- and early 16<sup>th</sup>-century Italy. In many ways, Valla was merely a forerunner to the style of academia that would become prominent just one generation later. For the generation of teachers and scholars after Lorenzo Valla, showmanship, performativity, and violent sarcasm were all part of the cult of academic personality that was necessary to succeed in the field. The fierce competition for academic prestige led scholars to seek out novel texts in which to specialize and claim “mastery” over smaller academic fiefdoms. As Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine noted, even “the very choice of such [obscure] works as subject matter was an act of audacity, and might be enough to make a reputation.”<sup>6</sup> The key difference between this competitive sarcasm and that of Valla is that the generation following Valla was focused so much on showmanship that many of them ended up “fabricating evidence to give their lectures more spice.”<sup>7</sup>

It wasn't just the scholars in quattrocento Italy who turned to more performative methods of demonstrating individuality. Men in the Italian Renaissance began wearing their unique personalities—quite literally—on their faces. Douglas Biow, noting the sharp change in Italian portraiture in the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, delightfully puzzles over the question of why Italian men went from clean-shaven to wearing an absurd variety of—and a variety of absurd—beards.<sup>8</sup> Biow initially raises and dismisses—to various degrees—several theories, ranging from the role of “other” shifting from the bearded Jew and Turk to the beardless natives of the “New World,” city versus country anxiety, and a rush to adopt the fashions of imposing cultures. Biow, noting that it would be “supremely difficult to validate...a direct cause-and-effect historical explanation for the appearance...of a

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<sup>6</sup> Anthony Grafton and Lisa Jardine, *From Humanism to the Humanities* (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1986), 83.

<sup>7</sup> Grafton and Jardine, *From Humanism*, 86.

<sup>8</sup> Douglas Biow, *On the Importance of Being an Individual in Renaissance Italy: Men, Their Professions, and Their Beards* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2015), 181–206.

fashion,"<sup>9</sup> ultimately suggests that the rise in rather unusual facial hair is likely attributable to two contributing factors—the invasion of Italy by the French and Italy's pronounced move towards a "courtly society" where men were "made to feel subordinate."<sup>10</sup> Biow suggests that beards became a method to signal both conformity and individuality.<sup>11</sup> Through their beards, Italian men could be unique and wear a mask of sorts to craft identity almost like a piece of clothing.<sup>12</sup>

This short detour on facial hair, combined with Grafton and Jardine's work on sarcastically performative scholars, serves to frame a key question: If Italian men just one generation after Valla were, in many ways, just like him, why did his piece on the Donation of Constantine become so important to the Reformation? After all, Valla was renowned for his "intellectual violence," and his sarcastic remarks towards the pope may have seemed a bit tame in comparison to those scholars who succeeded him. In order to answer these questions, a careful analysis of the structure of Valla's sarcasm—both overt and covert—must be done, though a brief overview of the content and the context of Valla's text seems prudent.

Lorenzo Valla's oration *De Falso Credita et Ementita Constantini Donatione*—also called *On the Fraudulent and Falsely Trusted Donation of Constantine*—also called *On the Donation of Constantine*—also called (both by Valla himself and to simplify things moving forward) the *Oratio*—is often recognized as the text that founded philology by using historical and linguistic approaches to decisively prove the Donation of Constantine as a forgery and—to hear Valla tell it—not a particularly convincing one. The forgery, likely Carolingian in origin,<sup>13</sup> was supposedly written by Emperor Constantine. In the dubious text, Constantine, newly Christian and in debt to Pope Sylvester for curing him of leprosy, gifts half of his empire, including Rome, to Sylvester and the Church. This conflation of spiritual and worldly power in the pontiff ends up being problematic, not necessarily because of how or if the Donation was utilized but because of the ensuing debates on the corrupting influence of temporal power on the supreme pontiff. Pope Innocent IV (1243–1254) was the first to actually claim secular power through the Donation, and by the fourteenth century, while the Donation was a source of de-

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<sup>9</sup> Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 189.

<sup>10</sup> Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 189.

<sup>11</sup> Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 195.

<sup>12</sup> Biow, *Importance of Being an Individual*, 205.

<sup>13</sup> G. R. Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation: Tradition, Emergence and Rupture*, 2nd ed. (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 2012), 110.

bate amongst papalists and imperialists, most pontiffs paid little attention to it.<sup>14</sup> Even Innocent IV viewed the Donation as “a confirmation of the temporal authority the supreme priest already possesses from Peter and Christ.”<sup>15</sup>

Whether derived from Christ, Peter, Constantine, or an unnamed forger, the conflation of secular and spiritual power led to social and political upheaval in Rome. When the papacy moved to Avignon, France, Rome was left in pieces as various factions competed for control of a now leaderless city. Making the authority gap even more confusing was the fact that there was a pope and an antipope from 1378 to 1429, and there were three different popes claiming authority in 1409.<sup>16</sup> Pope Martin V (1417–1431) finally consolidated the papacy and began to restore Rome, but his successor, Eugenius IV, had to flee Rome and set up his pontificate in Florence. Eugenius’s conflicts with other candidates for European leadership—the Council of Basel, Frederick III, and Charles VII of France—grew routinely more contentious and seemed beyond repair when the Council of Basel suspended and ultimately deposed Eugenius from office, electing Felix V (1438–1449) as an antipope.<sup>17</sup> Eugenius, through a combination of concessions, treaties, and Felix’s inability to gain any support, was able to return to Rome in 1443, weakened but victorious.

This is the context for Valla’s *Oratio*. Valla was then secretary to Alfonso, King of Aragon, who was one of the chief opponents of Eugenius IV. Alfonso was in a long-standing conflict to gain control of Naples from allies of Eugenius, and Valla’s biting sarcasm was deployed at Eugenius’s weakest point—mere months after the Council of Basel deposed him. Valla mentions Eugenius, both directly and, it would seem, indirectly, at several points in his *Oratio*, and it is this sarcastic assault on a sitting yet temporarily deposed pope that has largely been the source of Valla’s legacy and the primary site of critical inquiry.

Much of the critical work done on Lorenzo Valla’s *Oratio* focuses either on Valla’s intent or motivations for writing such an attack or on the impact of the text during the English Reformation, nearly 100 years after its initial composition. Some, like G.W. Bowersock, see the *Oratio* as more of an “extension of his literary and philosophical interests than as a political weapon offered to Alfonso in the struggle with Eugenius.”<sup>18</sup> Others, like Thomas Renna, have taken

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<sup>14</sup> Thomas Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation of Constantine in Historical Context, 1439–40,” *Expositions* 8.1 (2014): 1–28.

<sup>15</sup> Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation of Constantine,” 11.

<sup>16</sup> J. H. Plumb, *The Italian Renaissance* (New York: Harper and Row, 1961), 79–80.

<sup>17</sup> Plumb, *Italian Renaissance*, 3.

<sup>18</sup> Lorenzo Valla, *On the Donation of Constantine*, ed. and trans. G. W. Bowersock (Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 2007), vii.

issue with the *Oratio* itself, referring to it as “a rambling collage of disparate arguments only loosely connected” and suggesting that the reason for the odd structure of the text is that Valla was attempting to address several audiences—most particularly the German emperor.<sup>19</sup> Riccardo Fubini argues that Valla's text, “through the unheard-of accusation of falsehood, had turned the denunciation of the ‘authenticity’ of the *Constitutum* into a truly revolutionary instrument,” one which, to the coming Reformation, was “recognized” as sharing their “frontal attack on papal tradition and canonical norms.”<sup>20</sup> Whitford has gone one step further, demonstrating the crucial role of Valla's text in Martin Luther's classification of the Pope as the Anti-Christ.<sup>21</sup>

Whitford's work meticulously traces the connections between Valla and Luther, showing how Luther's 1520 encounter with Valla's text transformed Luther's concern that the pope “might be” the antichrist into a concrete certainty of that fact. What Whitford's work does not fully explain is why Luther became so enchanted with Valla's text. After all, as mentioned earlier, Valla was hardly the only writer to deploy his kind of sarcastic invective. Further, he wasn't even the first one to address the issue of conflated secular and religious authority. G.R. Evans offers an excellent overview<sup>22</sup> of the centuries-long debate over the “two swords” in which she points out that the nobility of Europe essentially only had two professional options—military service or religious service.<sup>23</sup> As such, the struggle between Church and secular authority was frequently an inter- and intra-familial struggle. Well before Valla, Bernard of Clairvaux wrote of the two swords by suggesting that one was to be wielded by the Church and the other for the Church.<sup>24</sup> While the *plenitudo potestatis*—the pope's claim to temporal authority—had been claimed as early as the 5<sup>th</sup> century by Leo I, it wasn't until the Middle Ages, particularly under Innocent III, that the claim was strongly pressed.<sup>25</sup> Not only was the issue of the two swords debated publicly more than a century before Valla's text, but the specific issue of the validity—or rather the lack thereof—of the Donation of Constantine had also been raised before Valla's text. Nicholas of Cusa, in his *De concordantia catholica*,

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19 Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation,” 2.

20 Riccardo Fubini, “Humanism and Truth: Valla Writes against the Donation of Constantine,” *Journal of the History of Ideas* 57.1 (1996): 79–86.

21 David M. Whitford, “Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence of Lorenzo Valla,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 61.1 (2008): 26–52.

22 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 110–124.

23 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 111.

24 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 115.

25 Evans, *The Roots of the Reformation*, 116.

cast doubt on the legitimacy of the Donation, and it was likely a topic of conversation during “the protracted debates about papal authority in the Councils of Ferrara and Florence in 1438 and 1439.”<sup>26</sup> So what was it about Valla’s text—a text that entered an old debate and covered no truly new ground—that so resonated with Luther and the Reformation? Valla’s use of a kind of layered sarcasm might be the most effective way to approach such a question.

The structure of Valla’s *Oratio* is important here because, as Renna notes, the various parts seem addressed to different audiences and, as will become clear, deploy different kinds of sarcasm. The *Oratio* opens with a brief introduction fairly devoid of sarcasm, wherein he feigns reluctance to speak but claims to have an obligation to do so in the name of truth. This quickly leads into the first part of the *Oratio*, in which Valla deploys several personae, each giving testimony to an imagined jury of princes and kings. First, he speaks as the sons of Constantine, questioning their father’s decision to give away their inheritance. Then he speaks as an orator for the Senate and the Roman people, telling Constantine that he has no right to give away Rome. Finally, he speaks as Sylvester himself, pleading with Constantine not to make a gift of an empire to a man who, as a good Christian pontiff, would be spiritually incapable of receiving such a gift.

The second section leaves the personae behind, but sees a sharp increase in sarcasm, as the speaker, presumably Valla, addresses an unnamed “you.” He is still railing against the illogical notion of the Donation and the utter lack of historical evidence that any such donation took place. This section also features the first direct reference to Eugenius IV, who, Valla notes, is “qui vivis cum Felicis tamen venia” [“still alive but only by the grace of Felix.”]<sup>27</sup> The third section is incredibly short<sup>28</sup> and involves Valla pointing out that Constantine was a demonstrated Christian before Sylvester’s papacy, based on historical records from Pope Melchiades, Sylvester’s predecessor.

The fourth section is the one most recognized for its deployment of philological analysis. In this section, Valla questions everything from geography to word choice in his destruction of the Donation, and he often directly addresses the forger, upon whom he offers his harshest sarcasm. The fifth section features Valla posing a hypothetical, that even if everything in the Donation were taken as fact, at some point, the empire was lost, and according to Biblical

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<sup>26</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, vi.

<sup>27</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 53.

<sup>28</sup> The third section of the *Oratio*, in Bowersock’s 2007 translation for the I Tatti Renaissance Library edition, is barely one page in length. In contrast, in the same edition, the first section is 17 pages, the second section is nearly 6 pages, the fourth section is 39 pages, and the fifth and sixth sections are each about 8 pages in length.



and Roman law, there was no right to reclaim a subject who had been free for so long.

The sixth and final section features a refrain of sorts, *The Roman Church has exercised its authority*,<sup>29</sup> to which Valla offers several rebuttals. The *Oratio* ends with Valla blasting several popes, the papacy itself, and Eugenius in particular, but it ends with Valla's statement that he wants his first speech to be one of counsel, not a call to action. He states, "nolo exhortari principes ac populos, ut papam effrenato cursu volitantem inhi-beant eumque intra suos fines consistere compellant, sed tantum admoneant, qui forsitan iam edoctus veritatem sua sponte ab aliena domo in suam et ab insanis fluctibus sevisque tempestatibus in portum se recipiet" ["I do not wish to encourage rulers and peoples to restrain the Pope as he surges ahead in his unbridled course and to force him to stay within his own borders, but only to counsel him, when perhaps he has already recognized the truth, to move back voluntarily from a house that is not his own into one where he belongs and into a haven from irrational tides and cruel storms."]<sup>30</sup> Valla comes off as something of an optimist here, as he hopes to see a change, as a result of his oration, where the Pope will become the "tantum vicarius Christi sit et non etiam Cesaris" ["vicar of Christ alone and not of the emperor as well."]<sup>31</sup> This optimistic conclusion—and Luther's likely reaction to it—will be useful in approaching the two distinct brands of sarcasm deployed by Valla. That, combined with the afterlives<sup>32</sup> of Valla's text, can shed light on why Valla's *Oratio*, as opposed to the others on this very topic, resonated with Luther.

The overt sarcasm and satire Valla constructs in his *Oratio* matches the five points of Ashley Marshall's definition of satire.<sup>33</sup> It is a "literary" art that "attacks" its "real" targets in an often "humorous" manner in a seemingly "negative" enterprise.<sup>34</sup> As George A. Test noted, "That satire is an attack is probably the least debatable claim that one can make about it."<sup>35</sup> Valla's overt sarcasm, particularly that unleashed on the presumed forger of the Donation of Constan-

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29 As translated by Bowersock. This phrase and the original Latin will be addressed later in this chapter.

30 Valla, *On the Donation*, 159.

31 Valla, *On the Donation*, 159.

32 The plural is intentional here—Valla's text can be shown to have at least three distinct afterlives—immediate, 16<sup>th</sup>-century, and contemporary.

33 Ashley Marshall, *The Practice of Satire in England 1658–1770* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2013).

34 Marshall, *Practice of Satire*, 2.

35 Marshall, *Practice of Satire*, 2.

tine, is nothing if not an attack. In Valla's first reference to the forger, he notes that he wants "optorto collo in iudicium trahere volo" ["to grab [him] by the neck and drag [him] into court."] <sup>36</sup> In short order, Valla takes his attack directly to the long-dead forger, practically frothing as he rails that the "Paginam privilegii appellat homo vesanus. Privilegiumne tu—libet velut presentem insectari—vocas donationem orbis terrarum? et hoc in pagina vis esse scriptum et isto genere orationis usum esse Constantinum?" ["madman calls it the *text of the grant*. Do you—I prefer to attack him as if he were present before me—do you speak of a donation of the world as a grant? Do you claim...that Constantine used that kind of language?"] <sup>37</sup> Valla's attack on the forger continues until he is literally without words, and he routinely opens his attacks with lines such as "O scelerate atque malefice...O caudex, o stipes!" ["you scoundrel, you miscreant...you blockhead, you dolt!"] <sup>38</sup> and he eventually appeals to Lactantius—historically the advisor to Constantine and tutor to his son—to "Revivisce paulisper, Firmiane Lactanti, resisteque huic asino tam vaste immaniterque rudenti" ["Come back to life, Lactantius, just for a moment, and shut up the gross and monstrous braying of this ass."] <sup>39</sup>

Valla is only slightly more generous towards those supporters of the forger, often addressed with an ambiguously utilized "you," whom he calls "non tam homines quam pecudes" ["more cattle than people."] <sup>40</sup> For example, at the beginning of the second section, when Valla questions the validity of the Donation based on the lack of evidence that Sylvester accepted any such offer, he notes "'At credibile est,' dicitis, 'ratam hunc habuisse donationem.' Ita credo, nec ratam habuisse modo verum etiam petiisse, rogasse, precibus extorrisse credibile est" ["'But,' you say, 'it is believable that he approved this donation.' It is as believable, in my opinion, as that he not only approved it but even sought it, asked for it, and extorted it by his prayers."] <sup>41</sup> Later, when Valla questions the fact that there are no records or accounts of Sylvester's control of the empire, asking the forger's supporters "que bella gessit? quas nationes ad arma spectantes oppresit?...Nihil horum scimus," respondetis. Ita puto nocturno tempore hec omnia gesta sunt et ideo nemo vidit" ["What wars did he wage? What nations on the verge of armed revolt did he suppress?...We do not know anything about this," you answer. So I imagine that everything was accomplished in the dead of

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<sup>36</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 61.

<sup>37</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 65.

<sup>38</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 67.

<sup>39</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 71.

<sup>40</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 51.

<sup>41</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 43–45.

night, and that is why no one saw anything.”]<sup>42</sup> In these passages—the ones directed at the unknown forger and the ambiguous “you”<sup>43</sup>—the sarcastic tone is unmistakable. Valla’s sarcasm drips venom in these passages, and it is nearly impossible *not* to read them in a sarcastic manner. These, in short, represent the kind of “intellectual violence” that Maffeo Vegio warned his friend about. What remains interesting here, however, is who is not addressed with this kind of dripping invective—and that is Eugenius IV.

In Whitford’s astute analysis of Valla’s influence on Martin Luther’s identification of the Pope as the Anti-Christ, he mentions one passage from the *Oratio* in particular, and that passage was part of Valla’s Pope Sylvester persona. In this persona, Valla has Sylvester deliver a speech to Constantine, expounding on the many reasons why the gift of an empire would be illogical. That Sylvester speech, however, includes several moments of overt sarcasm, exaggerated to highlight the ridiculousness of the Donation. In one moment, Valla’s Sylvester persona demonstrates that it is clearly aware of the arguments of the previous personae—the sons of Constantine and the orator of Rome—and even re-asserts those ideas that had been previously set forth by those earlier personae:

si foret tui iuris partem imperii cum regina orbis, Roma, alteri tradere quam filiis—quod minime sentio—, si populus hic, si Italia, si ceterae nationes sustinerent, ut, quos oderunt et quorum religionem adhuc respuunt, capti illecebris seculi eorum imperio obnoxii esse vellent—quod impossibile est—, tamen, si quid mihi credendum putas, fili amantissime, ut tibi assentirer ulla adduci ratione non possem, nisi vellem mihi ipsi esse dissimilis et condicionem meam oblivisci ac propemodum dominum Iesum abnegare

[Suppose you had the right to hand over to someone other than your sons a part of your empire containing Rome, the reigning capital of the world—something I do not at all believe—; suppose this people, suppose Italy, suppose all the other nations, seduced as they are by worldly attractions, would agree, against all plausibility, that they preferred to be subject to those whom they hate and whose religion they have hitherto spat upon. Even so, my most loving son—if you think you owe me some credence—I could still not be induced by any argument to agree with you unless I wished to be untrue to myself, forget my station, and almost deny my Lord Jesus.]<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 47.

<sup>43</sup> Valla’s use of the second person pronoun is intriguing if not a bit confusing. At times, he addresses the unknown forger as “you.” At other times, he uses the pronoun to refer to those who support the forger. The “you” appears at the beginning of the second section, which is preceded by Valla speaking in the persona of Sylvester. He is clearly *not* speaking as Sylvester here. He—as himself—had last addressed the audience of Kings and Princes—though it is clear that “you” does *not* refer to that high audience—an audience that, as will be shown later—included Eugenius IV.

<sup>44</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 31–33.

That Luther's thinking was so galvanized by a passage in a text that was dripping with sarcasm illustrates that the appeal of Valla's text was either accidentally or willfully misunderstood as an attack on an institution rather than an attack—or, even more aptly, an appeal—to an individual pope, Eugenius IV.

The covert/subtextual sarcasm can help to illuminate this appeal to Eugenius. From the earliest pages of his *Oratio*, Valla hints that he knows whose hands his text will fall into. When he first establishes his imagined audience of kings and princes, he states that he permits himself to plead as if in their company, “ut certe facio, nam mea hec oratio in manus eorum ventura est” [“into whose hands I am confident my speech will come.”]<sup>45</sup> Not only does this suggest that Valla believes that Eugenius will encounter his text, but it also—with a nuanced layer of sarcasm—gently jabs the pontiff for thinking of himself as a king or a prince—thus setting the rhetorical stage for Valla's entrance into the ongoing debate about the two swords—secular and spiritual. Valla continues to weave a sort of subtextual trap throughout the *Oratio*. In addressing his royal audience, he asks if any of them, in Constantine's place, would give their empire as a gift and remove themselves to a modest town: “Quid enim vobis exspectatius, quid iocundius, quid gratius contingere solet, quam accessio-nem imperiis vestris vos regnisque adiungere et longe lateque quam maxime proferre dicionem? In hoc, ut videre videor, omnis vestra cura, omnis cogitatio, omnis labor dies noctesque consumitur...quin ipse hic ardor atque hec late dominandi cupiditas, ut quisque maxime potens est, ita eum maxime angit atque agitat” [“What is normally more desirable, more pleasurable, more welcome than for you to enlarge your empires and kingdoms and to extend your sway as far and wide as possible? It seems to me that all your concern, all your thinking, all your effort is taken up day and night with this...this blazing passion for extensive rule most of all goads and drives one who is already supremely powerful.”]<sup>46</sup>

Through this subtly sarcastic question, Valla weaves a trap around Eugenius. If Eugenius is the head of an empire, as he claims to be via the Donation of Constantine, he has only two possible answers to this question—either he wouldn't give up his kingdom, and he must admit the unlikelihood of the Donation, or he would give up his kingdom, and he should do just that in the name of the faith. It also serves to chastise Eugenius for being overly focused on extending his authority and enlarging a secular “kingdom.”

If this suggestion seems a bit of a stretch, one need only look further along in the *Oratio*. Near his conclusion, Valla reveals his rhetorical cards and tells Euge-

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<sup>45</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 11.

<sup>46</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 11–13.

nius directly that he has demonstrated, via philology and logic, that the pope had possession of the empire “per ignorantiam atque stultitiam” [through ignorance and stupidity] and asks: “possedissee docui, ius istud, si quod erat, amittes? et quod inscitia male contulerat tibi, nonne id rursum cognitio bene adimet mancipiumque ab iniusto ad iustum dominum revertetur, fortassis etiam cum usufructu? Quod si adhuc possidere pergis, iam inscitia in malitiam fraudemque conversa est planeque effectus es male fidei possessor” [“will you not forfeit that right, if you ever had it? Will not knowledge provide a salutary removal of what your ignorance unfortunately brought to you, and will not your estate go back from an unjust master to the just, perhaps even with interest? But if you persist in keeping possession, your ignorance is straightaway transformed into malice and deceit, and you plainly become a possessor in bad faith”].<sup>47</sup>

While the “you” here is not explicitly connected with Eugenius IV, he would seem to be the only possible target. Not only does Valla proceed to rail against Eugenius by name in the passages immediately following this, but Eugenius is the only living pope able to “forfeit that right”—a right not claimed by Felix. This is also not the only part of the *Oratio* where Valla questions the intellect of the papacy in general and Eugenius in particular. Near the conclusion, Valla notes that he should not be surprised by the fact that pontiffs did not understand the philological flaws he found in the Donation, as they do not possess his skill with language. He says this in a far more sarcastic manner, of course, listing several instances where pontiffs have incorporated terms based on mis-translation specifically of Greek.<sup>48</sup> Here too is another instance of Valla likely subtextually attacking Eugenius directly. Valla was passionate about language and competitive about his skill therein. In his Proemium to his *Elegantiae*, titled “The Glory of the Latin Language,” Valla situated himself as a sort of linguistic savior of Rome: “Therefore, because of my devotion to my native Rome and because of the importance of the matter, I shall arouse and call forth all men who are lovers of eloquence, as if from a watch tower, and give them, as they say, the signal for battle.”<sup>49</sup>

Valla valued language—Latin in particular, but Greek, as well—so highly that he saw it as above temporal power. He viewed himself as a rare master of language, one who might recover true Latinity from the “barbarian” version that

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<sup>47</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 148–149.

<sup>48</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 131–133.

<sup>49</sup> Lorenzo Valla, “The Glory of the Latin Language,” in *The Portable Renaissance Reader*, ed. James Bruce Ross and Mary Martin McLaughlin (New York: Viking Press, 1953), 131–135.

was common at the time. Partly because of that mastery, he saw in himself an authority and a responsibility to speak out—often harshly—against those who had more temporal power. As he said himself at the outset of his *Oratio*—“Neque enim is verus est habendus orator, qui bene scit dicere, nisi et dicere audeat” [“No one who knows how to speak well can be considered a true orator unless he also dares to speak out.”]<sup>50</sup> But how does this connect to Eugenius? In November of 1443, as he was trying to secure permission from an irate Eugenius to return to Rome, Valla sent a letter to Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan. In this letter, Valla attempted to appeal to the shared history he and Eugenius had experienced, and he wrote, “Ego Eugenium ante papatum dilexi atque amavi adhuc adolescentulus, cum eidem preceptorum Grecurum litterarum uterque operam daret” [“I loved and cherished Eugenius before he was pope, from my youth *when we both studied with the same Greek master*” (emphasis mine)].<sup>51</sup> Both Valla and Eugenius—then known by his pre-pontiff name of Gabriele Condulmer—studied Greek with Rinuccio da Castiglion Fiorentino.<sup>52</sup> As such, Valla’s sarcastic critiques of the papacy—critiques not only grounded in a lack of skill with language in general but with Greek in particular—can easily be read as a far more personal attack on Eugenius the person—an almost schoolboy competitiveness—more than Eugenius as a representation of the papacy. While Valla is clearly attacking Eugenius, that does not necessarily mean that he is setting him up as an “arch-villain,” as Renna suggests.<sup>53</sup>

Valla certainly had superficial reasons to attack Eugenius on several personal grounds beyond schoolboy competitiveness. He had unsuccessfully sought an appointment with Eugenius on two occasions (in 1431 and 1434).<sup>54</sup> Further, Eugenius and Valla’s employer were long-time foes. Valla’s deep passion for his Rome also could have been an impetus for attacking the pope who terrorized its citizens before being driven from the city. None of these seem like justifications for a vitriolic attack, however. The lost job opportunity was nearly a decade past, and Eugenius, at the time of the *Oratio*, seemed to be on the verge of defeat anyway, having just been deposed as a heretic by the Council of Basel.<sup>55</sup> What seems particularly odd, however, is the fact that the covert/subtextual sarcasm deployed against Eugenius doesn’t quite fit the standard criteria mentioned earlier for satire, despite the harsh use of sarcasm.

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<sup>50</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 5.

<sup>51</sup> Valla, *Correspondence*, 143.

<sup>52</sup> Valla, *Correspondence*, 384. Note 3, Brendan Cook.

<sup>53</sup> Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation,” 8.

<sup>54</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, vi-vii.

<sup>55</sup> Renna, “Lorenzo Valla and the Donation,” 3–5.

While the subtextual sarcasm/satire in the *Oratio* is still literary and addresses a real target in a humorous way, it never quite reaches the level of a full-blown attack, to say nothing of being a wholly negative enterprise.<sup>56</sup> On the contrary, Valla offers several occasions where Eugenius, or any previous pope, could excuse himself of guilt—the excuse wasn't particularly positive, but it did offer a chance at absolution as Valla saw it. In the fourth section of his *Oratio*, Valla begins to establish this opportunity by asking those who “quicunque hunc vera dixisse existimant atque defendunt” [“think this person (that is, the forger) spoke the truth and defend him”] if their predecessors, those whom they cite as authorities on the Donation, would have persevered in their views “si eadem audissent que tu” [“if they had heard what you have heard.”]<sup>57</sup> He also notes that his audience, the amorphous “you” of the oration, is urging him forward in his attack on supreme pontiffs, a group “quos magis in delictis suis operire vellem” [“over whose mistakes I would rather draw a veil.”]<sup>58</sup> He concludes the fourth section by giving an even stronger excuse to past and sitting pontiffs—that they would not have been expected to see what he has seen because—as has been mentioned—popes haven't had his skill with language. He ends the section by stating “Hec dicta sint, ut nemo miretur, si donationem Constantini committicam fuisse pape multi non potuerunt deprehendere, tam et si ab aliquo eorum ortam esse hanc fallaciam reor” [“let these points be made so that no one may wonder why many popes were unable to grasp that the Donation of Constantine was a forgery, even though in my opinion this deception originated with one of them.”]<sup>59</sup> Rather than attack Eugenius mercilessly as he did the forger, Valla continuously opens the door to a justified excuse—and it seems reasonable to suggest that the excuse had more to do with the general exercise of secular authority than with anything specifically to do with the Donation of Constantine. The Donation was likely just a pretense, as again, Valla was not the first to suggest that it was a forgery. While none of the potential “escape clauses” that Valla seeded within his text would be particularly complimentary, he *did* include them, which suggests that the purpose of the *Oratio* was less intended as invective and more intended as corrective. As we have seen from his previous texts, from the letters of his contemporaries, and in the more overtly sarcastic portions of the *Oratio*, when Valla wished to be “intellectually violent,” he did so unambiguously.

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<sup>56</sup> Marshall, *The Practice of Satire*, 2.

<sup>57</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 117.

<sup>58</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 119.

<sup>59</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, 131–133.

Perhaps it should come as no surprise that such a layered text would have several vastly different textual afterlives. The modern reception has far more to do with the origins of philology than with anything ecumenical. While there were some positive responses to the text,<sup>60</sup> the initial reception of Valla's *Oratio* can best be summed up as one of acrimony on the part of those close to Eugenius IV, and a reaction of "meh" on the part of everyone else. This did prove temporarily problematic to Valla, particularly when his patron, Alfonso, changed his allegiances and reconciled with Eugenius, after the latter had parted ways with Alfonso's enemy, Rene of Anjou.<sup>61</sup> This shift in allegiance put Valla into an awkward position. Just three years removed from mocking the man, Valla saw Eugenius reconcile with his patron and make a triumphant return to Rome. It seems clear that Eugenius was harboring a grudge over the *Oratio*, but what is perhaps most telling is that the grudge seems to be more personal than institutional.

Valla tried on several occasions to regain access to his beloved Rome. He wrote twice to cardinals seeking safe passage, first to Cardinal Trevisan—the same cardinal who negotiated the reconciliation between Eugenius and Alfonso—in November of 1443, in a letter that praised Eugenius and stated that his *Oratio* was never written out of malice, and that he would have preferred to write it under the reign of any other pope.<sup>62</sup> When the letter to Trevisan, with its apology for the *Oratio* failed, Valla tried again in January of 1444, writing to Cardinal Gerardo Landriani and appealing for safe passage to Rome to visit his mother out of filial duty.<sup>63</sup> Interestingly, Valla also sent a letter to his friend, Giovanni Aurispa, about a month after his letter to Trevisan and a few weeks before his letter to Landriani, wherein he wrote, "Orationem meam De donatione Constantini, qua nihil magis oratorium scripsi, sane longam, rescribe an videris, habiturus a me eam, nisi vidisti" ["write back and let me know if you have seen my speech *On the Donation of Constantine*; despite its length, it is the purest piece of oratory I have written. If you have not seen it, you will receive it from me."]<sup>64</sup> Clearly, Valla wasn't quite so abashed as he seemed in his letter to Trevisan.

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<sup>60</sup> Shortly after publication, notable humanist Gregorio Tifernate read it and stated that it "had been written in support of the church of Christ, not against the church." See Valla, *On the Donation*, viii.

<sup>61</sup> Renna, "Lorenzo Valla and the Donation," 5.

<sup>62</sup> Valla, *Correspondence*, 143–145.

<sup>63</sup> Valla, *Correspondence*, 163.

<sup>64</sup> Valla, *Correspondence*, 157.



Eugenius's allies did manage to bring Valla before the Inquisition at Naples in 1444 based—officially—on his criticism of Aristotle and Boethius, but as soon as Eugenius died in 1448, the papacy held no grudge toward Valla. Nicholas V, Eugenius's successor, hired Valla as an apostolic *scriptor* in Rome. In 1455, Calixtus III made Valla papal secretary. As Bowersock has mentioned, "apart from personal enmity in the court of Eugenius, there was no sign that the papacy was smarting from his demolition of the Donation."<sup>65</sup>

The eighty years that passed between Valla's composition of the *Oratio* and the Reformation's use of it blurred many of these lines, however. By the mid-sixteenth century, Valla's *Oratio* was seen as a fierce attack on the papacy as an institution, and it was added to the Index of Prohibited Books in 1559.<sup>66</sup> Cardinal (now Saint) Robert Bellarmine was fond of referring to Valla as "praecursor Lutheri," in a none-too-flattering context. This shift in Valla's reputation had more to do with who was then *reading* Valla than anything that Valla had written. Preserved Smith claims that "the writings of Valla...had their place in the Reformer's library."<sup>67</sup> While Valla was popular with humanist thinkers—Erasmus and Vives both enjoyed his work, particularly on dialectic—it was only Luther who, as Whitford demonstrates, seemed to be changed by Valla's words and changed in such a way that fueled Luther's own "intellectual violence" towards Rome. It was Luther's reading—or perhaps misreading—of Valla's text that contributed to the tone of his open letter to Pope Leo X.

As noted earlier, Whitford argues that Valla, specifically the Sylvester speech, was the turning point that took Luther from suspicion about the Pope as Antichrist to fiery belief in that construction.<sup>68</sup> Luther seemingly extrapolated upon that bit of personae-driven, overt sarcasm to see in the papacy what he had already begun to suspect. Shortly after encountering Valla's text in February of 1520, Luther wrote to George Spalatin to relay his discovery of both the text and his use of it in labeling Rome as a seat of wickedness:

I have at hand Lorenzo Valla's proof...that the Donation of Constantine is a forgery. Good heavens! What darkness and wickedness is at Rome! You wonder at the judgment of God that such unauthentic, crass, impudent lies not only lived but prevailed for so many centuries, that they were incorporated in the Canon Law, and (that no degree of horror might be wanting) that they became as articles of faith. I am in such a passion that I scarcely doubt that the Pope is the Antichrist expected by the world, so closely do their acts, lives,

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<sup>65</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, ix.

<sup>66</sup> Valla, *On the Donation*, viii.

<sup>67</sup> Preserved Smith, *The Life and Letters of Martin Luther* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1911), 344.

<sup>68</sup> Whitford, "Martin Luther and the Underappreciated Influence," 3–4.

sayings, and laws agree. But more of this when I see you. If you have not yet seen the book, I shall take care that you read it.<sup>69</sup>

Particularly interesting about this letter is Luther's position that it is Rome that is the site of "darkness and wickedness." Where Valla was critiquing individuals—the forger, the believers in the forgery, and potentially ignorant current and former popes—Luther attacks the *institutions*—Rome and the office of the pope.

This distinction is made all the more obvious in Luther's letter to the pope. Sent in October of 1520 accompanied by a copy of Luther's *On the Freedom of a Christian*, the open letter contained tones reminiscent of Valla's overt sarcasm. Luther begins his open letter by stating that recent events had led him to "look to you from time to time, and to think of you."<sup>70</sup> At first glance, this may not seem to be overly sarcastic, but as editor and translator Tryntje Helfferich notes, Luther uses the familiar form of the German second person pronoun, thus situating the pope as his equal from the very beginning of his open letter and reinforcing his ideas about the papacy in general, as well as the falsity of the Roman Catholic hierarchy.

Throughout the letter, Luther insists that he has nothing but honor and respect for Leo X, but at the same time, he calls the Roman Curia "more terrible, more poisonous, and more hateful" than anything "under the wide heavens."<sup>71</sup> Whether Luther viewed Leo X or his office as the antichrist, it was clear that he fearlessly addressed the man as an equal. Luther concludes his open letter with a veritable line in the sand, telling Leo that: "For me to recant my teachings is impossible, and no one should attempt to force this unless he wishes to drive the matter into an even greater confusion. Furthermore, I will not endure rules for, or limits to, my interpretation of the Scriptures...If these two points are adhered to, then there is nothing else that could be imposed upon me that I would not most willingly do and endure."<sup>72</sup>

The language is unambiguous here, and almost has to be read as overtly sarcastic. Luther claims that "all" he wants is *carte blanche* to continue as he has been. As long as he doesn't need to recant and isn't forced to follow any rules or limitations, he is perfectly willing to bend. In short, as long as he doesn't have to do any of the things his critics want him to do, he'll be agreeable. He's practically ventriloquizing Valla's overtly sarcastic voice in this letter, nowhere more

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<sup>69</sup> Smith, *The Life and Letters*, 73.

<sup>70</sup> Martin Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian, with Related Texts*, ed. and trans. Tryntje Helfferich (Indianapolis: Hackett, 2013), 5.

<sup>71</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 9.

<sup>72</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 14.

clearly than in his closing address/warning to Leo X, where he tells the pontiff not to listen to "the sweet sirens who say that you are not a mere man, but are mingled with God, who can command and require all things. Things will not happen in this way, and you will not be able to make them happen."<sup>73</sup> He is openly challenging the narrative of Rome, and follows that up by telling him not to believe that he has any authority over heaven, hell, or purgatory. If Leo X did read this letter—and there is no record that he ever did, though it was published widely in several languages<sup>74</sup>—there is very little doubt that it would have served only to make a bad situation worse between Luther and the Roman Church.

At issue here is the fact that—based on the timeline of events—Valla inspired Luther's notion of a dark and horrid Rome, and a corrupt office of the papacy, which seems to be a clear misreading of Valla's text and context. While Rome was a disaster at the time of Valla's *Oratio*, Valla still loved it dearly. He returned to work for later popes after Eugenius IV. Further, the aspects of the *Oratio* that Luther had the strongest reaction to, per Whitford, were those passages that were delivered via personae to historical figures. In fact, one such passage was delivered *in the persona* of Pope Sylvester. Valla's text was more than mere "intellectual violence"—it was a nuanced exposure of a forgery that allowed Valla to deploy overt sarcasm to make his point. This overt sarcasm, however, was *not* aimed at the pope—either the office or the man in possession thereof. More than that, though, Valla's full text, particularly the later sections, urges reform and offers logical excuses for those—current or historical—who may have been complicit in the forgery. In short, Valla's *Oratio*, when read as containing two layers of sarcasm, can be read as a corrective—a way to restore Rome to its lost glory in keeping with Valla's humanist motives, rather than an invective.

This text is an easy one to misread. As Renna suggested, the *Oratio* was written in a style that seems knitted together, almost like a rhetorical exercise with several audiences. The overt sarcasm—which is admittedly far more fun than the subtextual—was true to Valla's over-the-line style. There were several elements in the structure of the text that would have resonated with Luther, particularly section six, which featured several refrains of "*The Roman Church has exercised its authority*," followed by Valla's railing against the right of the Church to exercise such authority. The Latin for that refrain—*Prescripsit Romana ecclesia*—suggests another reason why this may have appealed to Luther. A more literal translation of the phrase would be "The Roman Church has ordered or directed." Based on

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<sup>73</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 14.

<sup>74</sup> Luther, *On the Freedom of a Christian*, 4.

the usage of the term *Praescriptum* in the Code of Canon Law, the translation might be “the Roman Church has legislated”—as *Praescriptum* most often takes on the context of religious and/or civil legislation.<sup>75</sup> As such, Luther, who responded in kind every time the Church challenged him, would have likely resonated with this late section in Valla’s text, where Valla, in his own voice this time, critiques the notion of the Church exercising clerical and secular power—legislating, in other words—in clear, unambiguous overt sarcasm. Again, though, Valla is using that sarcasm to address a long-standing conversation on the two swords, not—as Luther seems to have read it—to take down the established Church hierarchy.

Ultimately, interpreting sarcasm is an imprecise activity that requires a certain amount of speculation. Even today, arguments crop up over the unintentional reading of—or missing of—sarcasm in Facebook posts, e-mails, and the occasional letters that still get written. If such issues are common when involving texts that are mere minutes or hours old, how much more difficult must it inevitably be when the text in question is nearly 600 years old or, in Luther’s case, 100 years old. As such, it is not my intention to disprove what others have written about Valla’s exposure of the Donation of Constantine, but rather to offer another informed bit of speculation. John Marenbon has written that the ideal way to engage with philosophy is to be aware that “time should have four dimensions”—their [the philosophies’/philosophers’] present, their past, their future, and the “relation between past thinkers and philosophy today.”<sup>76</sup> This seems to be a useful approach for addressing this area of time-distorted sarcasm, as well. It limits us to look only at the words on the page, as we are more likely to read our own time and experience into the texts of the past. Valla’s *Oratio* had a present—one where Rome was in shambles, there were several popes in competition for the title, and Valla’s patron was at odds with Eugenius IV. Valla’s *Oratio* had a past—one where it was merely one more voice in a long line of voices addressing the question of whether or not the sword of secular authority and the sword of spiritual authority ought to be wielded by the same man. Valla’s *Oratio* has a relation between past thinkers and philosophy today, as it is recognized as being a foundational text in the philological approach to textual studies.

What seems most interesting about Valla’s *Oratio*, however, is that it had several futures. The short-term future of the text was clearly one that reflected a personal acrimony and a corrective tone. The long-term future saw the text

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<sup>75</sup> Particular thanks are due to Father Peter Mottola, for his helpful assistance in puzzling over this translation issue and for lending his infinitely more refined skill in medieval Latin.

<sup>76</sup> John Marenbon, *Abelard in Four Dimensions: A Twelfth-Century Philosopher in His Context and Ours* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2013), 1.

burned and black-listed as a site of spiritual rebellion. The most likely explanation for that seismic shift in reputation in just under a century is that Martin Luther—intentionally or otherwise—saw what he wished to see in Valla's text. He took the most vitriolic elements from Valla as an assault on the office of the pope, when Valla's most vitriolic sarcasm was actually aimed at non-papal sources in the personified voice of an historic pope. It seems likely that Luther missed the more subtextual sarcasm outlined above, leading him to learn and embody a different form of "intellectual violence" than that which Valla had to offer. This misreading, in its own way, demonstrates the risks inherent in the very nature of "intellectually violent" sarcasm and, a full century after the fact, perhaps validates the warning that Maffeo Vegio had attempted to convey to his friend Valla in 1434.



Joe Ricke

## Snarky Shrews

### Gender Comedy and the Uses of Sarcasm

The distinguished editors of this volume [*yeah...Right!*]<sup>1</sup>, concerned about the dearth of first-rate scholarly research on this vital [*as if*] topic, have assembled a universally acclaimed inter-disciplinary community of medievalists to author the definitive volume [*whatever*] on how to detect sarcasm in medieval literature. *Cuius contarium verum est.*<sup>2</sup> [*Not!*]

As demonstrated above and at annual gatherings in far-flung exotic sites [*Leeds and Kalamazoo*], early twenty-first-century medieval scholars can be and often are sarcastic. Even without the evidence uncovered [*invented?*] in this volume, most medievalists would claim that medieval authors often used sarcasm or inserted it into the mouths of their characters [*See...Chaucer*].<sup>3</sup> What, though, is the actual evidence for or against the presence of snarky language and behavior in early English drama? Although perhaps many contemporary readers and performers assume the presence of such sarcasm as an obvious fact, the editors and essayists in this volume wondered aloud (and eventually in print) whether such assumptions were unduly influenced by our own sarcastic age. This essay, as part of that larger investigation, specifically analyzes gendered dialogue—that is, the dramatic dialogue between men and women about men and women. In works as late as *Taming of the Shrew* and *Much Ado about Nothing* and as early as fourteenth-century secular poetry and biblical drama, certain kinds of textual and contextual clues suggest that some passages are intended to be taken ironically and/or sarcastically. Further evidence, significant but less reliable, emerges from the assumption that performed texts contained specific, sometimes conventional cues, although such cues are only rarely

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1 According to Dilwyn Knox, *Ironia: Medieval and Renaissance Ideas on Irony* (Leiden: Brill, 1989), 71–2, Erasmus wondered that *ironia* had not received its own punctuation mark. This paper uses bracketed italics to mark the ironic use of irony [*about irony*].

2 “Of whom the contrary is true”: the refrain of a late medieval poem supposedly praising women. Titled “Abuse of Women” in *Trials and Joys of Marriage*, ed. Eve Salisbury (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2002), 247–49. “This refrain or burden, repeated after every stanza, negates what precedes” (259).

3 See every essay in this volume. And the introduction.

included as stage directions or referred to in dialogue.<sup>4</sup> Nevertheless, given the slight evidence we have, plus the writings of rhetoricians and the experiences of contemporary theater practitioners, such performative cues should inform interpretations of these texts. Working intentionally backwards from Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew*, the interpretation of which has famously come to depend on questions of irony and sarcasm, this essay, first, elaborates a methodology for detecting sarcasm and then attempts to uncover evidence that many lesser-known early English performance texts often featured ironic and sarcastic interactions between men and women.<sup>5</sup> Although demonstrating the pervasiveness of gendered sarcasm in these texts is my primary objective, I also attempt, especially in the conclusion, to theorize the social role of such gender comedy.

Despite the difficulty of reconstructing dramaturgical realities, the phenomenology of drama brings us closer than other literary forms to the actual experience of irony and sarcasm as defined by medieval and early modern rhetoricians. Both irony and sarcasm are primarily spoken tropes, and this same dialogical context, foundational to drama, grounds both *ironia* and *sarcasmos*. Both the bite of *sarcasmos* and the indirection of *ironia* arise in speech events between specific speakers and interlocutors. Snark and victim(s), if you will. This is further complicated, though, by the reality of audience presence and the common practice of direct address to the audience. Audiences not only overheard sarcastic/ironic language as confidants, but also sometimes experienced it as targets.<sup>6</sup> Thus, dramatic characters like Cain and Herod and Benedick in *Much Ado*, directly address the audience in ironic, even insulting, ways. If this sounds complicated, it is. The point, though, is that irony and sarcasm could be performed in a variety of ways at the same time. Snark and victim might shift

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4 Allen Dessen explicates “implied stage directions” in early modern drama in a number of works, especially *Recovering Shakespeare's Theatrical Vocabulary* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2006).

5 Due to the confusion of terms used to describe irony and sarcasm—in medieval, early modern, and contemporary rhetorical discourse—this essay uses *irony* to refer to double-meanings, *sarcasm* to refer to biting double meanings, and *snark* to please the editors. “The rhetoricians played something of a shell game with these terms—irony, sarcasm, antiphrasis, [etc.],” according to Norma Knox, *The Word Irony and Its Context, 1500–1755* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1961), 36.

6 See Meg Twycross, “The Theatricality of Medieval English Plays,” in *The Cambridge Companion to Medieval English Theatre*, ed. Richard Beadle (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 37–84, for a rich discussion of the practice and implications of direct address to the audience and other forms of medieval “theatricality.” She claims that medieval theater “insists on the presence of the listener,” 55.



from line to line, as could the status of the audience as witness, confidant, or victim.

Kate's famous final speech in Shakespeare's *The Taming of the Shrew* may or may not be sarcastic. Clearly, though, whether it is to be or not to be read ironically is the question. Further, how that speech is interpreted controls any reading or performance of the rest of the play, especially the play's presentation/performance of gender. According to Margaret Lael Mikesell:

The controversy is significant, for it aptly sums up the major division in critical opinion about the play, which coalesces in opposed analyses of Katherine's portrayal....In the straight reading, Kate, a successfully, happily tamed shrew, celebrates her conversion.... In the second reading, Kate delivers the speech ironically...This [second] reading is based upon the troublesome contradiction between her assertive actions in the final scene and her words, which counsel submission.<sup>7</sup>

In fact, Dana Aspinall argues that only three significant interpretive issues face scholars working on *The Taming of the Shrew*: the meaning of Kate's concluding submission speech, the relation of the play to the mysterious other play known as *The Taming of a Shrew*, and the purpose of the Christopher Sly Induction. She claims that "the other two issues are raised, as often as not, only as aids in determining a satisfactory interpretation of [Kate's speech]."<sup>8</sup> So, there are three critical issues and two of them are important primarily for what they say about whether we take Kate's final speech to be ironic or not.

In that speech, Kate famously preaches about the duties of wives. Ostensibly, this is delivered to two other wives, but there is also a sizeable on-stage audience and, of course, a contemporary theater audience interested in this performance. Significantly, Kate's speech is both the longest speech in the play and the longest speech by a female character in a Shakespearean comedy. After ten lines instructing the other wives to respect "thy lord, thy king, thy governor," Kate launches into her extended praise of husbands and call for universal wifely submission.

Thy husband is thy lord, thy life, thy keeper,  
Thy head, thy sovereign; one that cares for thee  
And for thy maintenance commits his body

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<sup>7</sup> Margaret Lael Mikesell, "Love Wrought These Miracles': Marriage and Genre in *The Taming of the Shrew*," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, ed. Dana Aspinall (London: Routledge, 2002), 119.

<sup>8</sup> Dana Aspinall, "The Play and the Critics," in *The Taming of the Shrew: Critical Essays*, ed. Dana Aspinall (London: Routledge, 2002), 3.

To painful labour both by sea and land,  
 To watch the night in storms, the day in cold,  
 Whilst thou liest warm at home, secure and safe;  
 And craves no other tribute at thy hands  
 But love, fair looks, and true obedience—  
 Too little payment for so great a debt.

.....

Then vail your stomachs, for it is no boot,  
 And place your hands below your husband's foot;  
 In token of which duty, if he please,  
 My hand is ready, may it do him ease. (5.2.136–79)<sup>9</sup>

A brief list of potential interpretive options of Kate's submission speech includes the following: It can be completely straightforward, the happy words of a happy former shrew. This is Mikesell's first option, and the one that she accepts. It can also be taken as ironic without being sarcastic. As in, *wink wink, Petruchio, how am I doing with this speech that I don't believe but that I am quoting in order to dupe the sexist powers that be?* A version of this view was first put forth by Margaret Webster in *Shakespeare without Tears* (1942) and later by Harold C. Goddard.<sup>10</sup> This kind of irony is insincere; the speaker means the opposite of what she says in order to have her way. As such, Goddard argues, Kate "can lord it over the man as long as she allows him to think he is lording it over her."<sup>11</sup>

In fact, though, this gets more complicated, since Kate's *meaning* is not technically false to whoever receives Kate's *wink* gesture (which this interpretation usually assumes). Potential recipients for Kate's "true meaning" include Petruchio, the entire audience, the women in the audience, Bianca and/or all the female characters on stage, and Christopher Sly. A third alternative is that Kate's speech is a species of full-blown snark or sarcastic/ironic language. *Wow! Hus-*

<sup>9</sup> William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), 343–414. All specific references are to this edition and parenthetical in the text by act, scene, line.

<sup>10</sup> See Brian Morris, introduction to *The Taming of the Shrew: The Arden Shakespeare*, ed. Brian Morris (London: Methuen, 1989), 144. The powerful *wink, wink* school of interpretation was anticipated and perhaps instituted by Kate's famous wink in Sam Taylor's 1929 film adaptation, starring Mary Pickford as Kate and Douglas Fairbanks as Petruchio. Kate winks directly at Bianca (who in a reverse shot is shown to "get" the irony) just as she finishes her submission speech, which is cut so to end with "they are bound to serve, love, and obey" (5.2.164). See Sam Taylor (adapt.) and William Shakespeare, *The Taming of the Shrew*, directed by Sam Taylor (1929; Burbank, CA: The Elton Corporation, The Pickford Corporation/United Artists).

<sup>11</sup> Harold C. Goddard, *The Meaning of Shakespeare* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1951), 1: 68.

*bands rock! Working hard for their little women! Get down on your knees girls and give it up for your masters! A...MEN.* This kind of irony isn't just insincere; it's a barbed arrow with a target. One problem with this interpretation is locating the specific target. Perhaps Petruchio takes this *ironically* (he thinks she's insincere with others yet really on his side), but Kate means it *sarcastically* (making fun of him and husbands in general). Given the sophisticated uses of direct address to the audience in early drama, even though these lines are supposedly delivered to the two onstage wives, it may be that the audience—as a whole or in separate groups (gendered or not)—functions as the butt of the sarcasm or as Kate's accomplice, the *snarked* or the *snarkio*. Diagram please?

All three of these possibilities and others have supporters. The significant point, though, especially as a starting point, is the importance of irony and, perhaps, sarcasm, to the plot, characterization, and themes of the play. Whether Kate is tamed, whether the play is even about taming—these depend upon how we interpret Kate's speech. Further, the controversy over her speech points to the contextual difficulties in unpacking other sarcastic/ironic discourse, especially in dramatic or quasi-dramatic texts. For such texts, *as texts*, lack the gestures, coughs, tone shifts, pauses, deep sighs, rolling eyes, and such that signal sarcastic speech between so-called "real people" [*my editors?*] or actors and audiences performing a text in real time and space. More precisely, such texts lack these markers until they are supplied [*like my italics*] by the interpreters—readers, editors, actors, and so on.<sup>12</sup> Such texts also lack the strong narrative presence, directing readers towards or away from irony, found in other writings (like sermons and confessions). It is possible, obviously, to elide these anxieties and cry *snark* based on whatever external concerns interpreters want to import. Even a company of scholar/actors to which I belong, rather more than less sensitive to medieval texts and contexts, has had its share of debates over irony imports.<sup>13</sup> Is it really there or just something we can't help but hear because of where we live and how much late-night television we watch?

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<sup>12</sup> John-Claude Schmitt writes that "the written form in which medieval literary texts have come down to us gives a poor account of the way in which these words were produced, mimed, received. That is to say that the spoken word and gesture, mimicry, dance, and music all play a part—as much as the 'the text'." Quoted in Jody Enders, "Of Miming and Signing," in *Gesture in Medieval Drama and Art*, ed. Clifford Davidson (Kalamazoo: Medieval Institute Publications, 2001), 3.

<sup>13</sup> Two particular "discussions" stand out: one concerning the degree of irony in Isaac's responses to his father Abraham and another concerning old Joseph's sarcastic (or not) words to pregnant Mary in "Joseph's Troubles about Mary." These plays were performed and recorded under the sponsorship of The Chaucer Studio at the International Congress on Medieval Studies (Kalamazoo, MI). See *Live at Kalamazoo: The York Plays—Fall of Angels, Fall of Man, Abraham*

Although Kate's sermon on wifely submission may not be specifically ironic or sarcastic (without more evidence), her lines to her father, spoken shortly after her initial encounter with Petruchio, almost certainly are:

Call you me daughter? Now, I promise you  
 You have showed a tender fatherly regard  
 To wish me wed to one half lunatic,  
 A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack. (2.1.283–286)

This is angry, but is it ironic? How, in fact, is it any different from plain old invective or *insultatio* which, confusingly, medieval rhetoricians sometimes called *sarcasmos*?<sup>14</sup> After all, Kate, and shrews in general, are famous for their sharp tongues, so much so that “scold” often stands for “shrew” in medieval and early modern writing.<sup>15</sup> In this case, textual and contextual clues provide the necessary cues for sarcastic irony despite the absent controlling narrative voice or the presence of a real-life gesturing performer. Despite her opening words of daughterly respect—“Now, I promise, you / You have showed a tender fatherly regard”—it becomes clear that Kate does not believe this. First, because her head is probably still spinning and her blood still racing from the preceding flying scene with Petruchio (2.1.182–277). The context suggests that her “wooer” hits her, so to speak, out of nowhere. While any wooer would be a shock, this particular “mad-cap” may look like a practical joke sprung on her by her father and his “mates.” But there is specific verbal evidence as well as textual. Most clearly, her later ejaculation—“[You] wish me wed to one half lunatic, / A mad-cap ruffian and a swearing Jack”—works to redirect her earlier words. She contradicts herself so completely that she is either a liar, a lunatic, or a snark.

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and *Isaac*; *The Brome MS Abraham and Isaac*, performed by Warren Edminster and others, The Chaucer Studio, 2010, CD and downloadable file. Also see *Shrew Plays before Shakespeare: Noah, Joseph's Trouble about Mary, and The Killing of the Children*, performed by Joe Ricke and others, The Chaucer Studio, 2015, CD and downloadable file.

**14** See Dilwyn Knox: “Definitions of *sarcasmos*...do not conform to the traditional definition of *ironia* as saying the opposite of intended meaning,” 177. Also see Norma Knox: “in the rhetorics of the Renaissance...the essence of sarcasm was felt to be on the ‘bitterness’ of feeling displayed by a verbal attack,” 10.

**15** Kate herself is called a scold by Hortensio (1.2.98) and Petruchio (1.2.184). See Frances E. Dolan, “The Cucking of a Scold,” in *The Taming of the Shrew: Texts and Contexts*, ed. Frances E. Dolan (Boston: Bedford Books, 1996), 288–296. Also see Pamela Allen Brown, *Better a Shrew than a Sheep: Women, Drama, and the Culture of Jest in Early Modern England* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2003), 61.

In performance, obviously, if audiences were to miss these verbal and contextual cues, they might still *get* the performative cue(s). Assume, for example, that the “Contrary Poem,” pretending to praise women but really abusing them, lacked its refrain. It still could have been presented and understood as sarcastic irony in performance. In fact, certain songs and poems in praise of women are so over-the-top, so exaggerated, that they suggest the contrary without saying so (winking instead of contradicting).<sup>16</sup> This kind of ironic knowledge is, of course, less certain knowledge to modern *readers*, but to the real audiences of physical performances, it was probably more certain than textual and contextual clues. Based on performance alone, an audience might react: *I’m not sure what she actually said, but I know it’s snarky!* Considering such performative cues is significant for contemporary scholars and performers attempting to unpack sarcasm in dramatic texts, especially when contextual and verbal clues already suggest the presence of snark. What if, for example, the actor playing Kate took a long pause between flattering and attacking her father? Thus, Kate’s “thank you, dear father, for arranging my wedding to this [*big pause*] Blinking Idiot!” may be an early modern version of “Let me introduce you to my brilliant son [*big pause*] who flunked out of community college.”<sup>17</sup> In fact, pauses alone may work to undercut an original statement in the way that *Cuius Contrarium* does, even without verbal contradiction. Here, instead of stating a contradiction, additional information overturns the original idea. In other words, the second part completes the statement in a surprising way, undercutting and deflating the first part. Regardless of how the oppositional idea comes into play, once the contrariness of sarcastic irony is admitted into the dramatic discourse, readers and auditors should be more sensitive to its possibilities elsewhere. Sarcastic irony has an odor that infects the air of discourse once detected. So, a performance of *Shrew*, having discovered definite signs of sarcasm somewhere, might play with the possibility of it elsewhere.

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16 S. H. Rigby, “The Middle English Scorn of Women,” in *A Companion to Britain in the Later Middle Ages* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2003), 515, argues that “even the apparent praise of women and of marriage by medieval writers was often meant ironically—or at least was read as such.” For example, “John Lydgate’s praise of women in his *Beware of Doubtleness* should, a manuscript gloss tells us, be read ‘per antifrasis,’ i.e., to mean the opposite of what it explicitly says.”

17 John Haiman, *Talk is Cheap: Sarcasm, Alienation, and the Evolution of Language* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 39. He claims that “separation by heavy pauses” or “framing pauses” may be overt signs of sarcasm. In fact, the pause can actually eliminate the need for later verbal redirection.

A similar pattern emerges in the entertaining interactions of two other Shakespearean shrews, Beatrice and Benedick in *Much Ado about Nothing*.<sup>18</sup> Both are famous for their raillery against each other, against the opposite sex, and against marriage. They are introduced to the audience's attention in a brief dialogue early in the play between Beatrice and a messenger. She asks, cryptically, "is Signior Mountanto returned from the wars or no?" (1.1.25–6). One of Beatrice's many names for Benedick, *Mountanto*, does not seem necessarily disparaging first, especially to a reader. Benedick is, after all, a soldier, and *mountanto* is a slightly garbled version of a word for a certain sword thrust.<sup>19</sup> Of course, voice or gesture might make it clearly ironic, suggesting by performance that Beatrice means something like "Mr. Braggart Soldier." Such a leap would be rather flimsy, however, without the kind of verbal and contextual evidence theorized above.

Shortly after her *mountanto* remark, Beatrice asks "I pray you, how many hath he killed and eaten in these wars? But how many hath he killed? for indeed I promised to eat all of his killing" (1.1.35–7). Later in the scene, she calls him "a very valiant trencherman" (1.1.41–2), "a good soldier to a lady" (1.1.44), and, after apparently agreeing that he is "stuffed with all honorable virtues" (1.1.44–5) by saying "it is so, indeed" (1.1.47), she undercuts and redirects her insincere agreement by quipping, "He is no less than a stuffed man" (1.1.47). Even without prior knowledge of the context, the reader slowly should be realizing that Beatrice means by all her whirling indirections and absurdities that Benedick is not "in her books."<sup>20</sup> Further contextual clues provided by Leonato, by Beatrice herself, and by the ultimate arrival of Benedick clarify that Beatrice's feigned praise is meant to damn. Once established—by both fuller context and more obvious abusive language, the possible performative cues suggest themselves. With that wider knowledge, Beatrice's previous lines to the messenger might be performed something like this:

"Signior Mountanto" [*exaggerated flourish and/or a grim facial expression*]

"I pray you, how many hath he killed [*pause*] and eaten [*emphasis*] in these wars?"

"But how many hath he killed? [*long pause*] For indeed I promised to eat all of his killing [*wry smile*]."

<sup>18</sup> William Shakespeare, *Much Ado about Nothing*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), 1406–1462. References are parenthetical.

<sup>19</sup> Shakespeare, *Much Ado*, 1407 n. 2. "In fencing, a montanto is an upright blow or thrust."

<sup>20</sup> The messenger's phrase may simply mean "not in your favor," but given Beatrice's head-spinning rhetorical indirections, he may be getting in on the irony as well as acknowledging her witty performance.

“He is a very valiant [*pause*] trencherman [*an unexpected word!*], he hath an excellent [*pause*] stomach [*equally unexpected; meaning—Benedick is neither valiant nor excellent*].” And so on. Obviously readers, actors, and directors who have worked with Shakespeare and Shakespearean irony could suggest a number of other possible readings for these lines. A non-ironic, non-sarcastic reading, however, is inconceivable.

Uncovering the sarcasm here influences how scholars, performers, and readers approach the rest of the play. Since many other lines might be read as sarcastic but lack clear textual and contextual clues, the definite evidence for a sarcastic Beatrice or Kate might influence a performative and interpretive swerve towards sarcastic irony elsewhere, including Kate’s final speech. It also, by way of sharp contrast, helps create the rhetorical structure that makes Beatrice’s wonderfully direct, non-ironic plea to “Kill Claudio” so startling and significant. In other words, recognizing examples of sarcastic irony is important because they provide the texture by which we understand everything else.

Ultimately, however, this essay is not about Shakespeare or his sarcastic shrews. That foreground provides a larger context for the sorts of gendered sarcastic ironic exchanges between Kate’s and Beatrice’s precursors, the shrews of medieval performance texts and their masculine interlocutors.<sup>21</sup> Although my Shakespearean examples were drawn from female speech, there is sufficient masculine snarking about women. Given the wider context of the anti-feminist tradition embedded in medieval and early modern culture, much “shrewish” speech can be read and heard as a response to and a defense against masculine speech acts which configured women as shrews (and worse). *Shrews* are, to some degree, constructed by the insulting speech and shaming behavior of the men who argue with them.<sup>22</sup> In the same way, shrewish speech sometimes resists such masculine definitions by reversing the paradigm, shaming the shamers.<sup>23</sup>

Variations and differences occur, given the complications and conflicting definitions of *ironia* and *sarcasmos* by medieval rhetoricians, plus the unfortunate fact that medieval drama was not written to demonstrate their definitions

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<sup>21</sup> See especially Katie Normington, *Gender and Medieval Drama* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), and Theresa Coletti, *Mary Magdalene and the Drama of Saints* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), as well as her groundbreaking essay “A Feminist Approach to the Corpus Christi Cycles,” in *Approaches to Teaching Medieval English Drama*, ed. Richard K. Emerson (New York: Modern Language Association, 1990), 79–90.

<sup>22</sup> Joseph Ricke, “Kate, the Commonplace: The Framing of the Shrew,” in *Approaches to Teaching Shakespeare’s The Taming of the Shrew*, eds. Margaret Dupuis and Grace Tiffany (New York: Modern Language Association, 2013), 123–132.

<sup>23</sup> See Brown, *Better a Shrew*, 9–10.



[or my thesis]. Examples range from ironic one-liners to full-fledged speeches by female characters to women in the audience about men. Similarly, sometimes male characters address the men in the audience about women. Noah's wife, for example, in the Towneley Noah play, speaks to the women in the audience about the shortcomings of Noah and all husbands. In a corresponding speech, Noah addresses the men in the audience about the shrewishness of his wife and warns that, unless preventative measures are taken (such as wife beating), their wives will be likewise shrewish. Such cases, featuring a spouse addressing the audience about a spouse involve a kind of gendered special pleading utilizing to the full the essential dramaturgical principle of direct address to the audience, potentially splitting the audience into cheering/jeering sections. Some plays go even further, eliding the on-stage spouse altogether and ironically addressing the audience members directly about gender issues. In Henry Medwall's interlude, *Fulgens and Lucres* (1490s, published 1516), a male servant character asks the women in the audience if most women choose their husbands based on "virtue," as Lucres has done earlier in the play. The obvious ironic suggestion is that real (audience) women do not. In fact, he says he has never heard of any previous example. His fellow servant then goes on in a rather lengthy passage to warn the men in the audience about shrewish women: "I warne you weddyd men everichone...let them evyn alone."<sup>24</sup>

Surprisingly, much of this gendered sarcasm occurs between biblical patriarchs and saints and their wives. Noah's very first line to his wife in the Towneley Noah Play—"God spede, dere wife"—presents an interesting example.<sup>25</sup> This seemingly innocuous line may be an example of dramatic snark. Two contextual clues, preceding and following, suggest that this could be more than a simple "Hello dear" in performance. Just before his greeting, Noah directly addresses the audience, telling them (while probably wringing his hands)<sup>26</sup> how much he fears the coming encounter since she is so "techy" [irritable]. Not much later, they are at it tooth and nail and tongue, fighting verbally and physically, when he famously calls her "ram skyt" [ram shit]. It is even more difficult, to interpret non-ironically another exchange immediately after their first big fight. He exits, after much verbal and physical abuse on both sides, saying "Wife, / pray

<sup>24</sup> See Henry Medwall, *Fulgens and Lucres*, in *The Broadview Anthology of Medieval Drama*, eds. Christina M. Fitzgerald and John T. Sebastian (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2013), 392–435, Part Two, lines 840–863. Also see Twycross, "Theatricality," 78.

<sup>25</sup> "Processus Noe," in *The Towneley Plays*, vol. 1, eds. Martin Stevens and A. C. Cowley. EETS, s.s.13 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 25–48. Hereafter cited parenthetically by line number.

<sup>26</sup> See note 39 below for more on hand wringing.



for me besele [continually], / To eft [until] I com unto the.” Of course, one might interpret Noah’s words as an attempt to recuperate the biblical hero and smooth the transition from wife beating to ark building. An anonymous editor [*grumble grumble*] made this same point to me. Regardless of how we take Noah’s words [*my way or the wrong way*], Uxor’s response to Noah smacks of snark: “Even as thou prays for me, / As ever might I thrive.” Here, as in our earlier examples, the snark signals emerge from the larger context and specific verbal cues. First, the lines come immediately after a rather nasty physical and verbal fight which destabilizes this “making up” dialogue. Further, Noah’s wife does *not* pray for him afterwards. Finally, Noah’s wife’s language seems to reject a reconciliatory meaning by her use of ironic tags. After Noah suddenly ends the fight by saying “Bot I will kepe charyte [charity], / For I have at do” [things to do], Uxor responds, “Full well may we misse the, / as ever have I ro” [as ever I have rest]. This statement is ironic in the same way as “even as you pray for me, as ever might I thrive.” The sarcastic tag lines “as ever I have rest” and “as ever might I thrive” function as grouching, more intonation than statement, driving home the snarky point. One can easily imagine the ways a good actor might “sell” the sarcasm, once sarcasm is allowed into the interpretation by the contextual and verbal clues. If the contradictory “*Not*” of a slacker teenager is a contemporary vernacular version of *Cuius contrarium*, these markers may be the medieval equivalent of “*Sure!*”

Other, more obvious, clues, both verbal and contextual, help us interpret Uxor’s double-tongued invective, especially her sharing of direct information with the audience. Shakespeare, of course, uses this convention to great effect, especially in *Richard III*, in which the villainous protagonist means one thing to his on-stage victims and another thing to the audience.<sup>27</sup> Richard even famously theorizes this theatrical practice during his double-edged dialogue with the young princes: “Thus like the formal Vice, Iniquity, / I moralize two meanings in one word” (3.1.82–83). Our proximity to a certain character and our knowledge of her intentions render certain lines and actions ironic and sometimes sarcastic, although they would not necessarily seem so to other on-stage characters. Other passages may not be ironic as such, but they set up other actions or dialogue as ironic. The same Towneley Noah play features several versions of such speeches. The information they disclose reveals that Uxor’s speech elsewhere is double-tongued. The question becomes not if she is ironic, but how often and when. Speaking directly to the audience she says,

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<sup>27</sup> William Shakespeare, *Richard III*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), 555–647. Specific reference is parenthetical in text. See also Robert Weiman, “‘Moralize Two Meanings’ in One Play: Divided Authority on the Morality Stage,” in *Mediaevalia* 18 (1995 for 1992): 427–450.

If he teyn [rage], I must tary,  
 Howsoever it standys,  
 With symland [semblance] full sory,  
 Wryngand both my handys . . . .  
 Bot yit otherwhile,  
 What with game and with gyle, [guile]  
 I shall smyte and smyle, [smite and smile]  
 And qwite hym his mede. [pay him back] (300–312)

Later in the same Towneley Noah play, bracketed by two additional fight scenes, Uxor and Noah take turns addressing their audience(s) about the shortcomings of their partners and, perhaps, reveal their “true feelings.”<sup>28</sup> “I wish I were a widow, and I know the rest of you girls feel the same,” she says. “Let this be a lesson to you, guys: I should have beaten her more when we were younger,” he says (560–583; paraphrases mine).

A similar example occurs in the Noah play from the Chester Mystery Cycle.<sup>29</sup> Noah addresses her as “Good wife” and invites her to board the ark. After she resists, he directly addresses the audience and asks them to be “witnesses” to the real nature of women and wives, as if to say, “you be the judge.”

Lord, that weomen bine crabbed aye, [always crabby]  
 And non are meeke, I dare well saye.  
 That is well seene by mee todaye,  
 In witesse of you eychone. (105–108) [everyone]

He then includes her more directly:

Good wiffe, lett be all this beare [fighting]  
 that thou makest in this place here,  
 For all the weene [they know] that thou arte mastere—  
 As soe thou arte, by sayncte John. (109–112)

This passage is particularly complex in terms of sarcastic irony, for in it, Noah brackets his complaint against her by twice addressing her as “good wife.” His complaint to the audience, though, ironizes this *good*. We are his witnesses

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**28** “[Audience members] are used as sounding boards for the characters’ opinions and reactions.... There is no such thing as a soliloquy: the character shares his fears and distresses with the audience’s willing ears.” Twycross, 55.

**29** “Noah’s Flood: The Waterleaders and Drawers of Daw,” in *The Chester Mystery Cycle*, eds. R. M. Lumiansky and D. Mills, vol. 1, EETS 3 (London: Oxford University Press, 1974), 42–56. References are parenthetical by line number.

that she is “crabbed” and “not meek.” Then, in the second part of the speech, he again directly addresses his wife as “good” and, surprisingly, asks her to consider that they are being watched by the audience, insisting that the audience knows that she has the mastery.

This passage is especially interesting for its meta-theatricality and for its significance to the play’s gender comedy, but is it actually ironic? In one way, it obviously is—in the ironic gap between his naming of his good wife and his description of her. However, by the end, he seems to be speaking straightforwardly to all concerned parties. She is the boss, and everybody knows it. Really? Or could this be the most elaborate irony of all, pulling the wool over her eyes (or trying to) and using the audience as accomplices. Though he acknowledges her mastery and calls the audience to witness, Noah’s concession speech may be ironic (somewhat like the third interpretation of Kate’s speech), given what follows. After all, regardless of his performance of submission, he keeps fighting until he finally wins this round (at least) of the match. After Noah’s wife finally does come on board the ark,<sup>30</sup> instead of singing “Hail Master,” he simply says, “Welcome, wife, into this boot [boat]” (245). This “welcome” need not be sincere and reconciliatory. In fact, Noah’s wife responds with a rather straightforward *thanks but no thanks*, not to mention physical violence of some sort: “And have thou *that* [emphasis mine] for thy note! [payment]” (246).<sup>31</sup> The battle, it seems, will continue in Noah’s family and perhaps in the world of the audience who, for a time, became both witnesses and participants in the gender comedy. As Noah’s wife says in the Towneley play, it’s as much about game and guile as it is screaming and slapping. Interpreters, therefore, need to be on full-time irony alert.

Sarcastic irony is so deeply embedded in performing gender that even old Joseph resorts to it when trying to talk some sense into his young bride Mary in the York Pewterers and Founders play, “Joseph’s Trouble about Mary.”<sup>32</sup> Snark in the holy family? It appears so. Even one of the greatest of medieval lyrical paradoxes, in Joseph’s mouth (and context) is almost surely sarcastic. “A maiden to be with child?”<sup>33</sup> he both asks and exclaims at the end of a long frustrating conversation with the maddeningly-cryptic mother of God.

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30 The dialogue implies that she is dragged on. See 241–244.

31 “That” implies a slap or some other physical violence.

32 “Joseph’s Trouble about Mary,” in *York Plays*, 2 vols., ed. Richard Beadle (London: E. Arnold, 1982), 1:117–124. Hereafter cited parenthetically.

33 Most famous among many versions of this is the lyric now identified as Bodleian 11670, “A God and yet a man?” The next line is “A mayde and yet a mother?” The poem’s insistence on the tendency for human wit to “sink under” such wonders, functions as a probably unintended com-

Joseph: Who had thy maydenhede Marie? Has thou oght mynde? [any idea?]  
 Mary: Forsuth, I am a mayden clene. [pure]  
 Joseph: Nay, thou spekis now agayne kynde, [against nature]  
 Slike thing might nevere na man of mene. [Such a thing a man could never assert]  
 A maiden to be with childe?  
 Thase werkis fra the ar wilde....[what you say is mad] (206–213)

Joseph ironically states the orthodox doctrine of Mary's virginal conception, embedding it in a language and a context that contradicts it. Earlier, he had done much the same with the Annunciation. When Mary's argumentative handmaidens, who take on the role of more traditional shrews, claim in Mary's defense that no *man*, only an angel, has visited her, Joseph ironically responds: "Thanne se I wele youre menyng is / The aungell has made hir with childe" (135–36).<sup>34</sup> Obviously, the context and surrounding dialogue indicate his disbelief; in performance it would probably be characterized by some gesture or change in voice or both. Although the bitterness is mostly deflected onto Mary's handmaidens, the fact remains that Joseph is sarcastic with and about Mary. After all, although she is special, she is also his wife, and such sarcastic irony is a default drive for husband/wife dialogue in early drama. How would an actor show this? The text itself may suggest the technique of ridicule by ironic repetition of another's statement. The practice of ironically/sarcastically repeating a statement of one's interlocutor, in this case "a maiden...with child" and "I see...an angel" (with a shift signaled by tone or gesture) in order to question or even mock it is standard snark shtick, then and now. It ironizes someone else's statement much like the *Cuius contrarium* phrase functions to ironize one's own statements.<sup>35</sup>

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mentary on Joseph's "trouble." See Poem 190, in *Middle English Lyrics*, ed. Maxwell S. Luria and Richard Hoffman (New York: Norton, 1974), 197.

**34** Boccaccio shows this to be a popular if troubling accretion to the annunciation story. See the story of Brother Alberto (Day 4, Story 2) in Giovanni Boccaccio, *The Decameron*, ed. and trans. Peter Bondanella and Mark Musa (NY: Norton, 1977), 87–94.

**35** Shakespeare's Hotspur uses this technique in his letter-reading scene in *Henry the Fourth, Part One*, ironizing what he reads by repetition or by saying things like "say you so, say you so?" (2.3.12). See William Shakespeare, *Henry the Fourth, Part One*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), 1165–1243. Similarly, Hamlet's "Seems?" spoken to Gertrude takes up her line ("Why *seems* it so particular with thee?) and throws it back at her with an ironic meaning (*Hamlet* 1.2.75–6). See William Shakespeare, *Hamlet: Combined Edition*, in *The Norton Shakespeare*, 3rd ed. (New York: Norton, 2016), 1751–1856. In Henry Medwall's *Fulgens and Lucres* the two clownish servants, A and B, often repeat each other's lines sarcastically or just follow them with a snarky "quod a?" They achieve sarcasm simply by repeating or "quoding" a non-ironic original. See Medwall, 401, n.8: "*quod a*: an expression, calling attention, usually

Joseph, that is, can repeat something that he heard from Mary or her minions (even the gospel), but in a way that ironizes it, calling it into question not only because it is outlandish (“against nature”) but, more importantly, because she’s his wife. Most significant, though, is not a line or two of sarcastic dialogue but the possibility that this mockery might reverberate through the rest of the play, influencing both how we hear/read the dialogue and how performers might highlight or shade certain aspects of the text. Significantly, too, it shows how deeply embedded sarcastic gender comic exchanges are in medieval literature and drama, given that they extend to such iconic saintly figures. In other words, it is one thing when “the bad guys” wag their heads at Jesus and sarcastically cry “Hail, King of the Jews!” It is something else again when the saints themselves turn snarks. If Joseph is, indeed, sarcastic towards Mary (and her passive-aggressive version of the annunciation),<sup>36</sup> the powerful scenes of revelation (from the angel) and reconciliation (with Mary) are richer and more powerful because Joseph realizes that he has been not only wrong but cruel.<sup>37</sup> Although this sarcastic irony is not part of the specific biblical source, it was a dramatic representation of another significant source—real husbands and wives in all their shrewish humanity.

The cultural awareness of the typical dialogue of husbands and wives, reflected in the early drama, finds perhaps its most extreme version in the various medieval plays about Abraham and Isaac. Like Noah, Abraham’s role as a patriarch is ironized by his depiction as a husband. He may be the father of a great nation, but he is also the husband of a woman who may not be as impressed with him as St. Paul was. Although the story’s ostensible purpose is to show

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contemptuously, to something another person has said (similar to a sarcastic ‘oh yeah?’ or ‘oh really!’ in colloquial Modern English). Used frequently in this play.”

**36** See Beadle’s editorial note, in *York Plays*, 2:91: “Mary’s laconic and equivocal answers to his insistent questioning build the dramatic tension in their encounter.” Of course, one need not believe that Mary is really “passive-aggressive” in the our modern sense of the term or that she is intentionally provoking Joseph’s frustration and anger by her Cordelia-like near-silence. It is enough that, in the play, Joseph, the husband of such a wife, finds it maddening and responds to it sarcastically. As we have seen, in the overdetermined methodology of medieval biblical drama, a patriarch can represent a friend of God and the father of all humanity after the flood, and yet be a hen-pecked, wife-beating old fart. Mary’s equivocation can both represent some important spiritual lesson and, at the same time, another frustrating tactic of wives in the battle of the sexes.

**37** In the Kalamazoo *Shrew Plays* production of 2014 (see note 13), the actor playing Joseph actually refused to perform irony and sarcasm, making the play, in effect, a play about his sufferings. He was confused and hurt, but never snarky. The reconciliation scene was still touching, but there really wasn’t much to reconcile.

and praise Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son, many of the plays make clear that Isaac has a mother whose voice will be heard. Although, ironically, Sarah is usually absent from the visible scene, she "appears," or, more precisely, speaks through the voices of Isaac and Abraham (and one famous stage direction).

In these examples, the irony depends upon the context (a father doing something rather drastic—child sacrifice—without consulting his wife) and the typical depiction of marital conflict which we have traced. In the Chester play of the Barbers and Painters, once Isaac realizes his father's plan to kill him, he blurts out, "Would God my mother were here with mee!" (297)<sup>38</sup> In modern performance, this will evoke a strong comic reaction. Whether a medieval audience would react the same way is unclear. In context, that line and those that follow it might instead have evoked a strong emotional response, especially from mothers who had lost a child.

Would God my mother were here with mee!  
 She wolde kneele downe upon her knee,  
 prayeing you, father, if yt might bee,  
 for to save my leife. (297–300)

These lines might sound ironic as well to a modern audience [*Pray to him? Geld him!*]. Perhaps some in the audience who saw the plays year after year and were used to the gender comedy would have developed an ironic attitude towards such situations, regardless of "authorial intent." Or perhaps it was actually intended as sarcasm. Fortunately, further information, especially a rare stage direction, points us towards comedy, suggesting that medieval audiences (and performers) might have interpreted this passage in a snarky way.

After being convinced by Abraham that his death is the will of God, Isaac says, "But yet you must doe Godes byddinge, / Father, tell my mother for nothing" (321–2). Readers who want to insist that this could not possibly be intentional irony might interpret this line to mean "don't tell mom, dad, because it would break her heart." And, of course, it can and probably does mean that on one level. However, Abraham responds to Isaac in a conventional gender comedy pose, sounding a great deal like Noah: "For sorrow I may my hands wring, / Thy mother I cannot please" (323–4). In other words, the play here, probably depending upon the audience's consciousness of typical gender comedy (as a kind of deep structure always ready to erupt into performance), calls for

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38 "Abraham, Lot, and Melchisedeck; Abraham and Isaac: The Barbers," in *The Chester Mystery Cycle* (see n.28), 57–79. References are parenthetical by line number.

Abraham, ironically and possibly sarcastically (to the degree that he is really insisting that Sarah is a shrew) to take Isaac's words of concern for his mother who is losing a child and turn them into concern for himself who has to go home and face a shrewish spouse. The strangeness of this comment in this place emphasizes its cultural importance. Right in the middle of this theologically weighty typological narrative, an arresting reminder of gender relations and the messy lives of families intrudes. The stage direction makes sure that the actor and audience get the message: "*Here Abraham, wringing his hands, sayth.*"<sup>39</sup> In the play's conclusion, Isaac, exclaims, "I had never so good wyll to gon hom, / And to speke wyth my dere moder" (422–3) [I've never wanted more to go home and talk to mom]. One imagines the unscripted response of wives and mothers. This example and others call into question the authorized version of gender relations, not so much by refuting the anti-feminist tradition, but by performing its contradictions. If women really are the weaker vessel, for example, why are these biblical heroes, spouting or enacting one bit of misogyny or another, so afraid of them? Further, in the audience-engaged dramaturgy of late medieval drama, could the feminist/feminized parody of masculine power, something performed and, perhaps, cheered on by part of the audience ultimately be contained? In this context, even something so simple and snarky as the shepherd's complaint about marriage in the Towneley "Second Shepherds' Play"—"These men that ar wed / Have not all thare wyll"—calls into question the power of husbands and the weakness of wives (105–6).<sup>40</sup>

The examples of gendered sarcastic irony in the biblical drama raises the question of sarcastic irony in the Bible itself. Does this tendency to render the lives of husbands and wives as snarky derive from inserting contemporary "realistic" material into biblical stories, or a performance tradition arising from popular culture, or a scholarly rhetoric overlaid onto the material? Or something else? Although the origins of this tradition lie outside the specific goals of this essay, it is obvious now, as it was to early rhetoricians, that scripture itself provided many examples of irony and sarcasm, even if late medieval dramatic versions may have exaggerated the idea and applied it more widely. However we understand the exact relation, because of their devotion to and reliance on the Bible, medieval and early modern writers commonly drew from it to flesh out their definitions and examples of rhet-

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39 "The Histories of Abraham," s.d., p. 71. We have few such directions, but the double emphasis here suggests how hen-pecked husbands or, at least, husbands with marriage "troubles" would be performed gesturally in late medieval drama. Noah's wife also wrings her hands as part of her "game and guile."

40 "Secunda Pastorum," in *The Towneley Plays* (see n.25), 126–157. Reference is parenthetical by line numbers.

orical tropes, including *ironia* and *sarcasmos*. Thus, although the degree to which early drama draws upon classical rhetoric is unclear, it is probable and demonstrable that the kind of irony and sarcasm embedded in biblical drama would be, in some ways, biblical.<sup>41</sup> Clearly, the Bible affords a rich tradition of irony and sarcasm, used by a variety of characters, male and female, human and divine. Also one God/man and even one ass.

Of more specific relevance, biblical narratives provide a framework not only for sarcastic irony but for the deeply embedded pattern of squabbling between shrewish spouses. Adams's blaming of Eve, as well as Eve's attempt to evade responsibility by blaming the serpent (early versions of "game and guile"), the sarcasm of old Sarah towards Abraham and God in Genesis 18 after hearing that she will be a mother (like Joseph's bitter sarcasm with Mary), Rebekah's gulling of Isaac on behalf of her son Jacob, the cruel realism of Job's wife ("curse God and die"), and other examples qualify, to varying degrees, the creation principle that "it is not good for man to be alone" (Genesis 2.18). Perhaps the insistence on the divine pattern of patriarchal hierarchy, instituted by the God of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the official doctrine of marital submission as the path to bliss, especially as filtered through the anti-feminist (and anti-marriage) tradition, is reflected in the shrewish wife of medieval popular literature. She finds ways, whether it be to smite or smile, by game or guile, to resist. Given the dogmatic "facts" that women were the weaker vessel and that husbands were to rule over their households like God over the creation, the messier facts of everyday disorderly real life were, perhaps, substantial enough to provide materials for dialogue, debate, irony, sarcasm, and even re-thinking. The Bible, then, provided both the so-called ideal and compelling alternatives. Shrewish husbands and wives criticizing one another also became a way of talking about gender, including parody and irony, undercutting or at least qualifying the authorized version of gender relations. The same scripture that claimed "It is not good for man to be alone" also warned that "It is better to sit in a corner of the housetop, than with a brawling woman" (Proverbs 21.9).

Eve Salisbury, in *The Trials and Joys of Marriage*, an anthology of medieval writings on gender, (*under*)states that "Heterosexual marriage as an institution was not always a stabilizing and orderly social force." She adds that, "the Middle Ages inherited a set of assumptions from classical and biblical sources that help-

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<sup>41</sup> Clifford Davidson links gestural rhetoric on the early English stage with a vast variety of examples from the visual arts—stained glass, wall painting, etc., 66–127. So "biblical sources" for early drama must be understood as already filtered through other media, including performance traditions.



ed shape its understandings of nuptial commitment.”<sup>42</sup> Such “assumptions,” though, were not just isolated propositions, but narratives, scenes, and characters, presented and represented in performances, sermons, songs, and art.

Salisbury traces a mostly positive view of marriage flowing from the scriptural tradition. Marriage was, after all, the design of God as taught in the account of Eve’s creation from Adam’s rib and the proclamation that “a man shall leave father and mother, and shall cleave to his wife” (Genesis 2.8). Another view, however, more clerical than biblical, was grafted on to that original understanding, producing “a deep ambivalence about marriage, articulated in Pauline theology and reiterated thereafter, subordinat[ing] the matrimonial state of human existence to a life of chastity.”<sup>43</sup> Although it is beyond this essay to excavate the many layers of medieval anti-feminism, a distinction can be made between a biblical view of gender and marriage (still obviously patriarchal) and the clerical view, linked to Jerome and heavily influenced by pagan writers. The latter was much more negative about women, sexuality, and marriage than scripture was. That this view went beyond anything in the Old Testament or in the teaching of Jesus did not go unremarked by medieval authors.

One way this tension plays out is in the various depictions of gender in medieval and early modern performance texts. It was not, after all, a one-sided, anti-feminist argument. Some straightforward lyrics in praise of women do appear, without the ironic tag or any other apparent ironic cue.<sup>44</sup> Christine de Pizan’s defense of women against the clerical/classical tradition in her *Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* (1405) raises the debate to an epic level.<sup>45</sup> She developed a contrarian biblical exegesis, reading the Bible so as to come to different conclusions about women than her opponents. In Christine, biblical heroines like Deborah and Judith and Esther are presented not only as models but as counter-examples against St. Jerome and his fifteenth-century disciples. Of course, Chaucer’s *Wife of Bath*, in the dramatic monologue called her prologue, resists the same tradition. Of her two most famous barbs against clerks and their apparent “mastery,” one features ironic exaggeration and the other is all-out sarcasm.

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<sup>42</sup> Eve Salisbury, ed. *The Trials and Joys of Marriage* (Kalamazoo: TEAMS, 2004), 1.

<sup>43</sup> Salisbury, *Trials and Joys*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> See “In Praise of Women,” in Salisbury, *Trials and Joys*, 247.

<sup>45</sup> Christine de Pizan, *The Book of the City of Ladies*, trans. Rosalind Brown-Grant (New York: Penguin Classics, 2000).

They both appear in one extended passage in which she describes and then responds to her husband's favorite reading, *The Book of Wicked Wives*.<sup>46</sup>

And every nyght and day was his custume  
 Whan he hadde leyser and vacacioun [leisure and time off]  
 From oother worldly occupacioun  
 To reden on this book of wikked wyves.  
 He knew of hem mo legendes and lyves [more]  
 Than been of goode wyves in the Bible.  
*For trusteth wel, it is an impossible*  
*That any clerk wol speke good of wyves,*  
 But if it be of hooly seintes lyves,  
 Ne of noon oother womman never the mo.  
*Who peyntede the leon, tel me, who?* [painted]  
 By God! if wommen hadde writen stories,  
 As clerkes han withinne hire oratories, [libraries]  
 They wolde han writen of men moore wikkednesse  
 Than all the mark of Adam may redresse. (682–696, italics mine)

The Wife suggests that the anti-feminist tradition, which had followed St. Jerome and his mostly pagan authorities, took a (wrong) turn at some point, distinguishing it from the biblical tradition as such. An alternative position, perhaps insisted on by women like herself, would point, as Christine did a decade later, to the “good wives of the Bible.” Of course, those wives may not have been perfect and they often were not virgins, the only kind of women (“holy saints”) praised by the clerical tradition. This leads her to say, exaggeratedly but memorably, that “it is an impossible / That any clerk wol speke good of wyves.” Obviously some could. Chaucer, for one, whose voice, in drag, comes through powerfully in her performance. But her/his point stands: clerical culture has a certain built-in resistance to women that goes beyond the admittedly already-patriarchal discourse of scripture. Her cryptic reference to the fable of the subjectified lion is her indirect way of saying that men, especially clerks, control the means of cultural production. She famously goes on, however, to drop any façade of snarkiness and to lash out (“By God!”) at clerical anti-feminism, a classic example of the more biting *sarcasmos* of the rhetoricians. It's not surprising, she rails, that women are (mis)represented as essentially wicked by a tradition that excludes them. How could it be otherwise since they don't read or write the sermons, the commentaries, or, especially, the anthologies about wives (wicked or other-

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46 Geoffrey Chaucer, “The Wife of Bath's Prologue,” in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987), 105–116. Specific references are parenthetical and by line.

wise)? Of course, the fiction that the Wife has actually read these sources and written this rebuttal is, just that, a fiction. But the moral meaning of such a fiction in *The Canterbury Tales* may have interested Chaucer either because he was a kind of medieval feminist<sup>47</sup> or because he was interested in how and why the dominant cultural view of sex and gender had developed and what the alternatives might be. The Wife doesn't straightforwardly answer her sarcastic question about painting the lion. She just asks a seemingly simple question which, given her words before and after and the story of Jankyn's book, must be interpreted as questioning, resisting, and deriding her target. In effect, her one little question about the lion, undercuts and ironizes an entire clerical tradition of anti-feminism. Throughout her text she has quoted that tradition directly, but like Hotspur she asks (one ironic way or the other), "say you so?"

This awareness of and possibly ironic stance towards clerical anti-feminism also appears in Chaucer's *The Nun's Priest's Tale*.<sup>48</sup> Like the contrary poem with its ironic Latin tag which undercuts stanza after stanza of flattering remarks about women, a famous passage involves Chauntecleer's attempt to flatter and flutter his lovely Pertelote after several hundred lines of arguing about the *significatio* of fowl dreams.

Now let us speke of myrthe, and stynte al this;  
 Madame Pertelote, so have I blis,  
 Of o thyng God hath sent me large grace,  
 For whan I se the beautee of youre face,  
 Ye been so scarlet reed aboute youre eyen,  
 It maketh al my drede for to dyen.  
 For, al so siker as *In principio*  
*Mulier est hominis confusio*,—  
 Madame, the sentence of this Latyn is,  
 "Womman is mannes joye and al his blis." (3157–3166)

Given the larger context, the typical interpretation that Chauntecleer, depicted as a rather over-sexed clerk, is using clerical Latinate language to mock the supposedly witless Pertelote is unconvincing. That may or may not be the point of the contrary poem. Whether its Latin tag should be taken as something that only men would understand, so that women could hear the anti-feminism (in a language they couldn't understand) but still be pleased with the English flattery, is a

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47 See Jill Mann, *Feminizing Chaucer* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2002) for a robust defense of Chaucer's feminist strategies.

48 Geoffrey Chaucer, "The Nun's Priest's Tale," in *The Riverside Chaucer*, ed. Larry Benson (Boston: Harvard University Press, 1987), 253–261. All references parenthetical by line number.

critical crux. If so, the poem rhetorically “splits the audience” in the way gendered dialogue does in the drama. Regardless, in “The Nun’s Priest’s Tale” the contradiction between the Latin text and the cocky translation seems to be a slip of the beak.

Indeed, the two cases have a sort of inverse structural similarity. The contrary poem says good things about women in English stanzas, but follows each one with an anti-feminist tag in Latin. Chauntecleer parrots [sorry], in Latin, the anti-feminist tradition, but follows it with a gloss or a translation in English which shows that he is either a witless clerk (my view) or a very witty cock (the traditional view). Unfortunately, for the latter argument, Pertelote has shown herself to be a thoroughly well-read [*and red-about-the-eyes*] *damoysele* by citing a number of classical sources, probably only available in Latin. An additional ironic possibility is that Chauntecleer meant to say one thing but switched gears, his texts and brains scrambled under the influence of “the beauty of her face.” Such would not be intentional irony on the rooster’s part, but it would still be irony, even sarcastic irony perhaps, on the narrator’s part and/or on the author’s part. The possibility that male-dominated, clerical culture could get things wrong as they move from text to gloss or from language to language is not necessarily the only meaning of this barnyard mistranslation. However, given Chaucer’s concerns voiced elsewhere, further criticism of the Latin clerical tradition’s anti-feminism, especially residing in the minds and mouths of foolish men and roosters may be registered here. If so, this is not so much a parallel of the *Cuius Contrarium* but its opposite. As if to say, *Men say some crazy stuff in Latin, but that doesn’t mean they know what they are talking about.* Perhaps Chauntecleer’s Englished perversion of Latin anti-feminism is allowed to stand in order to call attention to the very problem with those who paint the lion. They don’t make much sense but, given their mastery, they usually get away with it. That’s what mastery means. Still, that doesn’t mean that clear-eyed authors, experienced wives (of Bath or of Patriarchs), and engaged audiences can’t witness aloud to such absurdity. As with the drama, audiences of long poetic monologues, not to mention the tales of clerks and roosters, might be split by gender in receiving and responding to a work.<sup>49</sup>

That a medieval work might suggest such a thing and in this specific way (garbling a gloss) is not out of the question. In fact, the late medieval play of Adam and Eve (the Play of the Drapers) from the Chester Mystery Cycle may fea-

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49 The split need not be entirely by gender of course. An Heloise might side with the “masculine” side and a Chaucer with the “feminine.” A split is engendered, nevertheless.

ture just this kind of ironic male glossing about women.<sup>50</sup> After the fall, Adam, unwilling to wait for God, curses Eve:

Woman, cursed mote thou bee,  
for wee bothe nowe shente...  
Yea, sooth sayde I in prophecye  
when thou was taken of my bodye—  
mans woe thou woldest bee witterlye;  
therefore thou was soe named....(259–272)

Although this specious etymology, *woman* derived from “mans woe” is rather standard in medieval anti-feminism, clerks and others knew that Adam didn’t really speak English. Still, it’s a common enough linguistic anachronism. The question remains, though, given the tradition of mutual recriminations between the two, whether Adam’s curse of Eve may be a reflection of his own peevish nature and his desire to blame her for the Fall. Something definitely smells sinful when, shortly after God has arrived on the crime scene and reprimanded the two of them, Adam cruelly lashes out at Eve. Whether the play means to suggest that this attitude is unduly harsh (and an unfortunate result of the Fall) is unclear but possible.

Nowe all my kynde by mee ys kente  
to flee womens intycement.  
Whoe trusteth them in any intente,  
truely hee is disceaved.  
My licourouse wyfe hath bynne my foe. (349–353)

One has to wonder really how women in the audience responded to this kind of rant, reminiscent of so many other ones in medieval literature. Interestingly, Adam refers to his “kynde” who now know to flee women. Usually, of course, Adam’s *kind* would mean humankind, but in this highly-gendered discourse, he defines more narrowly, perhaps creating the “split audience effect” this essay has traced.

Given that model, as well as the obvious willingness (displayed for example by Chaucer) in the late fourteenth century to ironize such anti-feminist discourse, what rules out the same kind of effect being achieved here? The text itself presents a further clue that Adam’s perspective represents not so much the biblical view, but the medieval anti-feminist tradition which may, in fact, be held up

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50 “Adam and Eve; Cain and Abel: The Drapers,” in *The Chester Mystery Cycle*. (See n.28), 13–41. All references are parenthetical by line number.

to scrutiny. Despite his claim to have done so, Adam never actually did prophesy “mans woe” by calling Eve “woman” earlier in the play. What he did, in fact, call her was “virago”—the word Jerome uses for her in the Vulgate and, therefore, more appropriate to clerical culture.

I see well, lord, through thy grace  
 bonne of my bones thou his mase;  
 and fleshe of my fleshe shee hase,  
 and my shape through thy sawe.  
 Therefore shee shalbe called, iwisse,  
 “viragoo”, nothinge amisse;  
 for out of man taken shee is,  
 and to man shee shall drawe. (145–152)

Not only, then, is Adam forgetful about what he originally called his other self and his sweet reasons for doing so, but he is not necessarily glossing the original word very accurately either. *Virago* does indeed sometimes carry rather negative connotations in the late Middle Ages as something like a domineering woman (or worse).<sup>51</sup> Earlier, at least in the early Christian era, it did not necessarily have that meaning but expressed a high view of woman to match the “vir” of man (linguistically connecting both with virtue). Following, probably, the *Cursor Mundi*, Adam takes *virago* to mean that woman *a-goes* from and to *vir*. It is impossible to decipher, with certainty, whether this text suggests that Adam’s gloss of the Latin/biblical original should be taken by the audience with suspicion. But perhaps the text raises the ironic possibility that a *virago* is not just one who comes out from and goes back to man, nor is she necessarily the nasty, domineering woman that the word sometimes suggested. The point is not so much what *virago* means, but how the dominant patriarchal culture reads or glosses it. In fact, *virago* may signify a strong, even heroic, non-male human being, the kind populating Christine’s *City of Ladies*. Asserting so meant resistance to the authorized version of gender, and often this was enacted by irony and sarcasm, especially in dramatic texts. Such resistance was perhaps less about belittling the other, and more about interrogating and mocking an anti-feminist tradition that, shown for what it was, choked on its own confusing interpretations of both authority and experience.

In a sarcastic age, of course, we might be tempted to read sarcasm into everything where half a century ago appeared only four-fold allegory. Paying close at-

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<sup>51</sup> An excellent survey of the history of the word is provided in Juliette Dor, “Chaucer’s Viragos: A Postcolonial Engagement?” in *Intersections of Gender, Religion, and Ethnicity in the Middle Ages*, ed. Cordelia Beattie and Kirsten A. Fenton (NY: Palgrave, 2011), 155–82.

tention to performance texts and uncovering, even to a limited degree, the verbal and contextual cues for sarcasm(s), help reveal the extent to which the depiction of gender relations depended upon snarky men and women. This points interpreters back towards the broader cultural issue of how performance texts, especially with their convention of direct address to audiences, allowed a space to address women directly and, sometimes, to mock men and masculine prerogatives. The role of such texts in the cultural dialogue about gender can't be measured, but the fact that it occurred at all (given the official version) and that it links with concerns like those of Chaucer's Wife and, later, Shakespeare's shrews, suggests a significant but often overlooked source of cultural debate and, possibly, the slow work of cultural change. Further, when interpreters of all kinds carefully attend to rather than suppress the sarcastic irony in medieval and early modern performance texts and allow it to inform both explication and performance, a richer and more radical (that is, deeply rooted) understanding of these texts emerges. Ultimately, then, the question of gendered snark in the early English drama, especially in the dialogues between and about husbands and wives, is no joke [*reader rolls eyes*].<sup>52</sup>

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52 An earlier, introductory version of this essay was presented at the International Congress on Medieval Studies, Western Michigan University, May 2015. Thanks to the many readers who have given me their feedback, including several snarky arched eyebrows.





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# Index of Names

Abū Nuwās [al-Ḥasan b. Hani] al-Ḥakamī  
87, 97, 108

Aelfric Bata 22

– *Colloquies* 22

Aelfric of Eynsham 38

– *Lives of the Saints* 31, 38, 80

Aesop 186–189

al-Ṣabbān, Muḥammad ibn ‘Alī 88

al-‘Alawī, Yahyā ibn Ḥamzah 88, 116

al-Ḥamawī, Shihāb al-Dīn Yāqūt 105

al-‘Askarī, Abū Hilāl 100

al-Baghdādī, al-Khaṭīb. 91, 94, 105

al-Dhahabī, Muḥammad b. Aḥmad 106

al-Ghazzī, Abū al-Barakāt 99

al-Jurjānī, Abū Bakr ‘Abd al-Qāhir 87, 101

al-Ma‘arrī, Abū al-‘Alā’ 90

al-Mutanabbī, Abū al-Ṭayyib Aḥmad 99,  
110–112, 115 f.

al-Tabrīzī, al-Khaṭīb 108

al-Wāhidī, Abū al-Ḥasan 111

Alfonso el Sabio 229

Aristotle 175, 229–231, 291, 305

Arundel, Thomas, Archbishop of Canterbury  
276

– *Constitutions* 276

Bakhtin, Mikhail 6, 234, 240 f.

Baudrillard, Jean 183

– *Symbolic Exchange and Death* 183

Bayhaqī, Muḥammad ibn Ḥusayn 106

Bene de Firenze 10

Bernard of Clairvaux 295

Boccaccio, Giovanni 134, 140, 324

Boncompagno da Signa 4, 120

Boswell, John 239

Brunetto Latini 16, 119 f., 123–125, 129 f.,  
133

– “Letter to Pavia” 16

– *Li Livres dou Tresor* [The Book of Treasure]  
125, 133

Byron, George Gordon, Lord 172

– *Don Juan* 172

*Canterbury Tales* 167, 169, 172 f., 180, 331

Carroll, Lewis 13, 21–23, 40

Caxton, William 179, 186 f., 191, 195 f.

– *Recuyell of the Historyes of Troye* 179

Cecco D’Ascoli 142

Cela, Camilo José 231, 242, 244 f.

Chaucer, Geoffrey 4 f., 10, 17, 21, 167, 169,  
171–173, 179–184, 311, 315 f., 329–335

Chrétien de Troyes 178

– *Cligés* 178

Cicero 4, 17, 120, 130, 168 f., 183, 230 f.,  
250

– *De oratore* 4, 120

Collyngbourne, Wyllyam 172

Dante Alighieri 119, 134, 137, 139

– *Monarchia* 16, 119, 134–142

d’Ardenne, S.T.R.O. 174

Day, Angel 7 f., 90, 102, 324

– *English Secretorie, The* 7

Donatus, Aelius 4, 6 f., 9 f., 16 f., 272,  
282 f.

– *Ars maior* 7, 272

Dryden, John 171 f.

– *Absalom and Achitophel* 172

Eberhardus Bethuniensis 4, 9

– *Graecismus* 9

Erasmus 250, 305, 311

Geoffrey of Monmouth 167 f.

Geoffrey of Vinsauf 4, 6, 169

– *Poetria Nova* 169

Gottfried von Straßburg 264

– *Tristan* 18, 264–266

Gregorio da Rimini 280 f., 285 f.

Guido delle Colonne 178

– *Historia destructionis Troiae* 178

Guido Vernani 119, 134, 141

– *Refutation of the “Monarchia” Composed  
by Dante* 134

Hartmann von Aue 261 f.

– *Gregorius* 261–264, 268

- Henryson, Robert 17, 185–197, 199–203  
 – “Cock and the Jasp, The” 188, 192, 195, 200  
 – *Morall Fabillis* 185, 187, 192, 197, 200  
 – “Paddock the the Mouse, The” 200–203  
 – “Preaching of the Swallow, The” 197
- Ibn Manẓūr 100, 109  
 Isidore of Seville 4, 17, 67
- Joan Airas de Santiago 246  
 Julian of Toledo 4
- Lactantius 298  
 Lombardus, Petrus 4, 10  
 – *Sententiae* 10  
 Luther, Martin 18f., 291f., 295–297, 299f., 305–309  
 – *On the Freedom of a Christian* 306f.  
 – “Open letter to Pope Leo X” 305  
 – Pope as Antichrist 305  
 Lydgate, John 187, 194f., 201f., 317  
 – *Isopes Fabules* 194, 201
- Macrobius 11f.  
 – *Saturnalia* 11  
 Map, Walter 2, 4  
 – *Nugae* 2, 4  
 Marie de France 187, 194f., 201f.  
 Medwall, Henry 320, 324  
 – *Fulgens and Lucre* 320, 324f.
- Nesbit, E. 13  
 – *Railway Children, The* 13  
 Ngai, Sianne 197  
 – *Ugly Feelings* 197  
 Nicholas of Cusa 295  
 Nun’s Priest’s Tale 167, 173, 331f.
- Pecham, John 276  
 – *Ignorancia sacerdotum* 276  
 Pero García Bungalés 234  
 Pier della Vigna 120, 129f.  
 Pizan, Christine de 329f., 334  
 – *City of Ladies/Le Livre de la Cité des Dames* 329, 334
- Plato 9, 17, 228–231, 291  
 Pseudo-Aristotle 4  
 Puttenham, George 17, 166–168, 170f., 173, 183  
 – *Arte of English Poesie, The* 17, 166, 171
- Quintilian 2, 4, 121, 165  
 – *Institutiones oratoriae* 4
- Shakespeare, William 3, 10, 19, 143, 173, 312–314, 316, 318f., 321, 324, 335  
 – Beatrice 110, 112, 143, 318f.  
 – Benedick 143, 312, 318f.  
 – Iago 10  
 – Kate 19, 313–317, 319, 323  
 – *Much Ado about Nothing* 311, 318  
 – Petruchio 314–316  
 – Richard III 172, 321  
 – *The Taming of the Shrew* 19, 312–314, 316, 319  
 Snorri Sturluson 51  
 St. Augustine 251
- Taylor, Sam 89, 314  
 Theophrastus 9
- Valla, Lorenzo 18f., 291–309  
 – Vegio, Maffeo 291, 299, 309  
 Venerable Bede 4  
 Virgil 11f., 167  
 – Aeneas 169f., 272  
 – *Aeneid, The* 9, 11, 167, 272  
 – Servius 167  
 – Turnus 9, 272, 282  
 Vives, Juan Luis 305
- Wace 168  
*Wife of Bath’s Tale* 17, 179, 183f.  
 Wolfram von Eschenbach 266f.  
 – *Parzival* 266–268  
 Wyclif, John 18, 271, 273–275, 277–279, 283f., 288f.  
 – *Trialogus* 274f., 277f., 283f., 288f.

# Index of Subjects

Abbot Tesaro Beccaria of Vallombrosa 120

*Acts of Thomas* 80

affect 24, 43, 189, 197, 200

Alexander de Villa Dei 4

allegory 3, 6, 168, 171, 185, 272f., 283, 288f., 334

– *allegoria* 7, 10, 168, 171, 272

– *permutatio* 168

ambiguity 11, 16, 24–26, 41, 43, 46, 51f., 55, 58, 61f., 89, 99, 115, 232, 239

*Andreas* 23, 29–31

angels (good, rebel) 271, 280–282, 288

Annas 276

antiphrasis 8, 312

Aristotle 4, 175, 229–231, 291, 305

*Ars dictandi* 120, 130

*artes poetriae* 169

Ash Wednesday 286

Augustinian Friars 284

– Gregorio da Rimini 280f., 285f.

– Guglielmo da Cremona 285

Aurispa, Giovanni 304

*A/Y Memorandum Book* 278f.

Babylon, king of 153, 272f.

ballad 181f.

– “Alison Gross” 181–183

*Battle of Brunanburg* 15, 30

*Battle of Maldon* 15, 38f.

– Byrhtnoth 22, 38–40

Battle of Montaperti 119, 133

*Beowulf*

– Beowulf 10, 15, 22, 26, 29, 32–37

– Unferth 29, 32–34

– Wiglaf 35–37

Bernard of Clairvaux 295

*Bevis of Hampton* 17, 154–163

Bible 8, 10f., 273f., 276, 327–330

– Matthew 9, 69, 81, 127, 133, 169, 171, 286

biblical history 271

biblical plays 271, 276

Black Death 271

Bologna 119, 141

*Bone Florence of Rome, Le* 173

Boojum 13, 21, 40

Bull *Si fratrum* 134

Burton, Roger 278

Caiaphas 276

Cambridge University 3, 6, 10f., 26, 44, 46, 65, 67, 86, 89, 93, 103f., 121, 126, 143, 189, 233, 273, 277, 279, 312

*cancioneiro* 229, 235f., 243

*cantigas* 15, 18, 227–238, 240, 243, 246–248

*cantigas de amigo* (or *d’amigo*) 227, 231

*cantigas de amor* (or *d’amor*) 227, 231, 237, 247

*cantigas de risaoelha* 236–240

*cantigas d’escarnho e de mal dizer* 18, 225, 227f., 231–235, 240, 248

*cantigas profanas* 229

Cardinal Bertrand du Pouget 119

Cardinal Gerardo Landriani 304

Cardinal Ludovico Trevisan 302

Cardinal Ottaviano degli Ubaldino 129

Cardinal Robert Bellarmine 305

*charientismus* 8

Chester Mystery Cycle 322, 326, 332f.

– Abraham, Isaac 315f., 325–328

– Chester Noah play 322f.

– “Chester play of the Barbers and Painters” 326

– Play of the Drapers 332

Christ, accusers 9, 11, 31f., 34f., 69, 81, 131, 136, 154, 275–277, 283f., 287, 289, 294f., 297, 299, 304

clergy 120, 122, 128f., 137, 139, 235, 276–278, 284, 289

Clervaux, John de 274

Coemgen of Glendalough 81

comedy 1, 8, 30, 85f., 92, 99, 114f., 133–135, 139–141, 163, 228f., 249, 252, 311–313, 323, 326

“Comprar quer’eu, Fernan Furado, muu” 237, 240

- Constantine, Emperor 31, 293f., 296,  
298–300
- Corpus Christi (feast, pageants) 170, 272f.,  
275–279, 319
- councils 129, 271, 296
- Blackfriars Council 275
- Council of Basel 294, 302
- Council of Constance 275, 277
- Creation 17, 19, 120f., 196, 198, 271, 273,  
280, 283, 286, 289, 328f.
- Cú Chulaind V
- Cuius Contrarium [“Contrary poem”] 173,  
317, 321, 324, 331f.
- David and Goliath 167
- “Death of Aife’s Only Son, The” V
- De Berangier au lonc cul* 8, 15
- De concordantia catholica* 295
- deictic mode 168, 172
- De reprobatione Monarchie composita a*  
*Dante* 119
- derision 1–4, 6–10, 12, 14–16, 18f., 23,  
31, 36, 38, 88, 135–138, 165f., 169,  
171, 183, 186, 197, 200, 272f., 282,  
287f.
- *derisio* 2–5, 8, 12, 137
- devils 15, 174, 272f., 278, 282, 284, 287,  
289
- dialogue 3, 10f., 142, 177, 263, 280,  
282f., 288, 311f., 318, 321, 323–325,  
328, 335
- discourse analysis 3
- disputations 119, 280f., 288
- Donation of Constantine 18, 291, 293–  
295, 298, 300, 303–305, 308
- “Don Beeito, ome duro” 246f.
- doxxing 59
- Easter 88, 90, 98, 110f., 266, 279
- education 183, 185, 187, 196, 276f., 280,  
284
- Elijah 8, 10
- emotion 11, 63, 169, 183, 186, 189–191,  
196–200, 203, 258f.
- English Reformation 294
- epimythium 185–197, 200–203
- Epistolaria* 120, 130
- ethics 112, 138, 185f., 225
- Eucharist 275, 279, 283
- Eumedes 272
- fable 15, 17, 175, 185–203, 330
- fabliau 1–4, 6–8, 11, 14, 18f., 171
- Fáfnir 52
- Farinata degli Uberti 128, 133
- Fernán Díaz (Fernan / Fernam / Fernão Díaz /  
Días) 234–240, 242–245, 247
- Fernan Furado 237–244, 247
- Fernán González de Seavra 237, 240
- flame wars 62
- Flateyjarbók* 42, 47f., 50, 53, 55, 60
- fleering frump 183
- Florence 120–125, 127–133, 137, 141, 173,  
285, 294, 296
- flyting 15, 23, 29, 33f., 39f., 165, 316
- Follie’s Anatomy* 8
- France 1, 17–19, 66, 174, 226, 233, 271,  
279, 294, 316
- Frankness of Speech trope 171
- Frederick II, Emperor 121, 129
- Frederick the Fair of Austria 137
- Friars Club 235
- Fulgens and Lucre* 320, 324
- Galician-Portuguese 15, 18, 225–227,  
229–231, 233, 235, 239, 242, 246, 248
- Gawain 144f., 162f., 267
- Gaytrick, John 277
- Geirrøðr 52
- gendered dialogue 311, 332
- genre 6f., 15–17, 19, 22, 27, 40, 42, 57,  
85f., 89f., 92, 97, 100, 104f., 108–110,  
114, 116, 138, 150, 164, 185–188, 190,  
195, 203, 227f., 232f., 239f., 252, 276,  
313
- ‘*Gest Hystoriale*’ of the Destruction of Troy  
177f.
- Giordano of Terracina 130
- God 11, 18, 30, 32, 34–36, 38, 40, 43, 52,  
57, 64, 67, 70, 74f., 79–81, 84, 101–  
103, 105, 116, 124, 126, 131f., 136–138,  
140, 142, 144, 149f., 153f., 156, 160–  
163, 176f., 187, 194, 197f., 261f., 265,  
268, 271–273, 280–283, 285–289,

- 305, 307, 320, 323, 325f., 328–331, 333
- Graziolo de' Bambaglioli 141f.
- Great Schism 271, 283
- Guelfs and Ghibellines 121, 132f.
- Guido Novello 128, 133
- Hákon, Earl of Hlaðir, Norway 59f.
- Haraldr Sigurðarson harðráði, king of Norway 16, 41
- Henry V 275
- Henry VII of Luxemburg 137
- heresy 72, 141f., 271f., 275, 279f., 289
- heretics 15, 142, 271, 273, 279
- Hickscorner* 183
- Hildebrandslied* 18, 249, 254–259
- Holy Roman Emperor 134, 137f., 140
- honor-price (*enech*, *díre*, or *lóg n-enech*) 64
- hostage (*gíall*) 73–75
- legal fasting (*troscud*) 78–80
- hostilis inrisio* 165, 167, 175, 272
- humor 2, 4, 6, 10, 15–17, 21f., 24, 26–28, 31, 34f., 37f., 47f., 50, 58, 62, 64, 66, 78, 81, 83, 85–87, 93, 96, 101, 116, 133, 144, 147, 149–151, 163, 229, 231–233, 237, 239, 242, 245f., 248f., 251–254, 268
- Anglo-Saxon 15f., 21–28, 30f., 34, 37f., 40, 231
- Galician 227, 231f., 236, 241f., 245
- Hunting of the Snark, The* 13, 21
- impoliteness studies 3
- Index of Prohibited Books* (1559) 305
- Infancy Gospel of Thomas* 69
- insultatio* 18, 316
- invective 2–4, 11f., 42, 57, 61f., 86, 92, 100, 107, 109, 119, 138, 140, 165, 169, 174, 183, 229f., 233, 235, 289, 295, 299, 303, 307, 316, 321
- Ireland 63–69, 72–74, 76, 78f., 81, 83f., 264
- apocryphal scriptures 69, 80
- canon law 64f., 71, 279, 305, 308
- distraint 74, 78f.
- honor-price (*enech*, *díre*, or *lóg n-enech*) 64f., 68, 70–74, 76–78
- Irish canon law 64f.
- *Canones Hibernenses* 71
- Old Irish *Table of Penitential Commutations* 72
- Irish saints' *Lives* 63
- Colmán mac Lúacháin 78f., 81, 83
- Columba of Iona 76
- Comgall of Bangor 70
- Mochoemóg of Liath Mochoemóg 73f., 83f.
- Mocholmóg 78–81, 83
- Patrick of Armagh 66–70, 83
- Irish vernacular law 64, 68, 73, 76–78
- *Bechbretha* 71, 75
- *Bretha Crólige* 64, 71
- *Bretha Nemed Toísech* 64, 71
- *Críth Gablach* 64, 68, 71–73, 75
- irony 2–7, 9f., 12–14, 24, 34f., 42, 47, 53–55, 61, 66, 85, 88, 93, 97f., 101, 133, 139, 142, 146, 156, 166, 168–172, 177, 185f., 249–251, 254, 257, 259–261, 263, 268, 311f., 314–319, 322–328, 332, 334f.
- echoic theory of 54
- *ironia* 2, 4, 6f., 9–13, 18, 66, 170, 185, 311f., 316, 319, 328
- pretense theory of 54
- Israelites 273
- Italy 16, 18, 119f., 122–124, 134, 137f., 140, 142, 226, 255, 292f., 299
- “Joseph’s Trouble about Mary” 316, 323–325
- Juliana, prioress of Mount Corillon 174, 279
- Kay 142, 144f., 162f.
- King Arthur 10, 145
- King Dinis 227, 246
- Denis 227
- Diniz 227
- King Manfred 129, 133
- La<sub>3</sub>amon *Brut* 168
- Lancaster, duke of 274, 278

- Lapa, Manuel Rodrigues 235–238, 243, 246
- laughable 142, 229–231, 238
- Lay Folk's Catechism* 277
- legal fasting (*troscud*) 78–80
- princes' truth (*fir flathemon*) 75
- property claims (*tellach*) 73f.
- Les iiii Souhais St Martin* 8
- Liège 279
- Henry of Gueldre, Bishop 279
- Mount Corillon, priory at 279
- Li Sohaiz Desvez* 8, 16
- litotes 2, 22, 31, 40, 56
- Lollards 18, 271, 276f.
- Lollardy 273, 276
- Lucca 128f.
- Lucifer 18, 272f., 277f., 280–284, 289
- Ludwig IV of Bavaria 137
- Lulz 46, 58, 62
- malice 166, 171, 184, 301, 304
- Marqués de Santillana 240
- marriage 1f., 5–9, 12, 14–19, 143, 148f., 160–162, 235, 261, 311, 313, 317f., 327–329
- metamessage 2, 9
- metaphor 24, 53, 55, 135, 138, 166, 169, 239, 241–245, 247
- moral 2, 7, 9f., 14, 44, 60, 112, 116, 126, 175, 185, 200, 225, 233, 242, 249, 281, 331
- Morkinskinna* 42, 48f., 52f., 55
- Nibelungenlied* 251, 259
- Níð 59–62
- Njál's Saga* 18
- obras de burlas provocantes a risa* 237
- Occitan 226f., 233–235, 247
- Octavian* 145–148, 152
- Ofermod* 33, 38
- off-the-record discourse 47, 55, 57, 61
- Oldcastle, Sir John 275
- Old English 15f., 22, 25–30, 37f., 174
- riddles 27–28
- overlearned cognitive process 189f.
- Owl and the Nightingale, The* 17, 174f., 177f., 183f.
- Oxford University 2, 4–8, 13, 19, 23, 65, 76, 85, 93, 98, 102, 143f., 166, 173, 186, 250, 272, 274f., 277f., 317, 320, 322
- Balliol College 274
- Merton College 274
- Pavia 119f., 122–127, 129f., 132f.
- Peasants' Revolt 271, 275
- Perceval 144f., 150–152, 162f.
- performance 1, 57, 60, 93, 183, 227, 229–231, 233, 239, 241, 245, 262, 274, 278, 280, 312f., 317–320, 323f., 326–330, 335
- Peter Damian 139
- Peter della Corbara 140
- picturation 172, 180, 183
- Pisa 129
- politeness studies 3
- Pope, Alexander 12, 15f., 18f., 122, 129–134, 137, 139f., 171, 184, 233, 262, 275, 283f., 292–297, 299–309
- Pope Alexander IV 120f., 129–131
- Pope Calixtus III 305
- Pope Clement VII 283
- Pope Eugenius IV 292, 294 296f., 299–305, 307f.
- Pope Felix V 294, 296, 301
- Pope Gregory XI 275
- Pope Innocent III 6
- Pope Innocent IV 293
- Pope John XXII 134, 140
- Pope Leo I 295
- Pope Leo X 305
- Pope Martin V 294
- Pope Nicholas V 305
- Pope Sylvester 293, 299, 307
- Pope Urban IV 279
- Pope Urban VI 283
- Portugal 225–227, 229, 240, 246
- power 2, 17f., 60, 68, 70, 72, 75, 78, 80, 82, 84, 94, 114, 121, 134, 136, 146, 152, 154, 159, 164, 169, 177, 180, 183f., 192, 202, 249, 254, 256, 260, 265, 269,



- 271–273, 275, 280 f., 283, 287–289,  
293 f., 301 f., 308, 314, 327
- pragmatics 2 f., 23, 53 f., 92
- Pride 3, 8, 10, 33, 125, 156, 190 f., 200,  
255, 265, 272, 280, 284, 289
- *Superbia* 10
- pronunciatio* 11
- property claims (*tellach*) 73 f.
- verbal assault 63, 65, 70 f., 74, 77, 80,  
165
- violation of sanctuary (*díguin*) 72–74, 77
- Provençal 226 f., 233–235, 247
- punctuation poems 173
- quality, maxim of 2, 7, 9, 24, 53, 56, 85,  
143, 170, 172, 186 f., 261
- Quattrocento Italy 292
- religious orders 284, 289
- friars 128, 235, 274, 277 f., 283 f., 286,  
289
- monks 76, 83, 256, 284
- Rene of Anjou 304
- retranca 231 f., 236, 241, 245 f., 248
- rhetoric 6 f., 9, 11 f., 97 f., 120 f., 142, 169,  
183, 198, 251, 272, 276, 316, 327 f.
- colors of rhetoric 169
- trope 3 f., 6–8, 12, 18 f., 53, 56, 91, 107,  
165, 169, 171, 272, 312, 328
- Rhetorica ad Herennium* 17, 168 f., 183
- Richard II 271
- ridiculous 229 f., 239, 242, 249, 253
- Rinuccio da Castiglione Fiorentino 302
- Rome 38, 122, 128, 130, 140 f., 174, 293 f.,  
296, 299, 301 f., 304–308
- saints' lives 15, 22, 37, 84
- salvation 281
- sarcasm 1–19, 23 f., 42 f., 46–48, 53, 55,  
61, 65–67, 70, 76, 79, 81, 84–100,  
102 f., 107, 109, 113–117, 119–121, 124,  
127, 129–134, 137–140, 142–144, 146,  
148, 150 f., 158 f., 161, 163–167, 169 f.,  
172–177, 179 f., 182–184, 186, 196,  
203, 228 f., 231, 235, 248–254, 257–  
264, 266–269, 271–273, 280, 282 f.,  
287 f., 291–293, 296 f., 299 f., 302,  
307–309, 311 f., 315–317, 319–321,  
324–329, 334
- covert sarcasm 292 f., 300, 302
- overt sarcasm 292, 297, 299, 305–308
- *sarcasmos* 2, 4, 6 f., 9 f., 13, 15, 18, 23,  
120 f., 167, 272, 312, 316, 319, 328, 330
- *sarcasmus* 6–8, 166, 168 f., 171, 173,  
183, 228
- *sarkasmos* 2, 144, 228
- subtextual sarcasm 300, 302 f., 309
- Satan 31 f., 284
- satire 1 f., 4 f., 10–12, 51, 68–71, 78, 89,  
100, 108 f., 138 f., 165, 171 f., 185 f., 251,  
297, 302 f.
- “Saturday Night Live” 1, 5
- Sege of Melayne, The* 153 f.
- Senna Old Norse insult-poem genre  
57–59, 62
- Septuagesima Sunday 286
- Sermons 6 f., 19, 119, 286, 315, 329 f.
- Shepheardes Calendar* 8
- E.K. 8, 165 f.
- shrews 15, 311, 316, 318 f., 324, 335
- Siena 121, 126, 128 f., 133
- Sigurðr Fáfnisbani 52
- sins 3, 84, 176
- Sir Eglamour* 148 f., 163
- Sir Hain et Dame Anieuse* 8, 15 f.
- Sir Perceval of Galles* 144 f., 150 f.
- Sir Tryamour* 151
- Skaldic poetry 52, 54
- snark 9, 13–15, 17 f., 21–40, 63–66, 70,  
78, 83, 143–145, 148, 151–155, 157 f.,  
161–163, 185, 188, 195 f., 225, 228–  
238, 245 f., 248, 312, 314–317, 320 f.,  
323–325, 335
- Sneglu-Halla þáttur* 16, 41 f., 47, 51, 54, 57 f.
- Einarr fluga 59–61
- Halli 16, 41–43, 47–50, 53–62
- Sigurðr 52, 59, 61
- Þjóðólfr Arnórsson 50
- Spain 67, 102, 225 f., 232
- Spalatin, George 305
- St. Andrew 29–31
- St. Augustine 120, 169, 251, 277, 284
- St. Juliana 174
- St. Lawrence 38

- St. Margaret 174  
 St. Mary's Abbey, York 277  
 St. Nemo 11f.  
 – *Reprobratio Nefandi Sermonis* 11  
 – Stephanus 11  
 St. Paul 325  
     Pauline theology 329  
 St. Paul's Cathedral, London 172, 275  
 Sudbury, Simon, Archbishop of Canterbury 275  
*Sultan of Babylon, The* 151–153, 163  
 sympathy 202, 250  
  
 Thor 148  
 – Þórr 52  
 Towneley Plays 273, 320, 327  
 – *Magnus Herodes* 170  
 – “Second Shepherds’ Play” 327  
 – Towneley Noah play 316, 320–323, 325–327  
 – Towneley Play 323  
 – Uxor 321f.  
 – Wakefield Master 170f.  
 transformation 57, 68, 83, 110, 145, 182, 261, 278  
 translation, Old English 1, 3f., 15, 21, 25–27, 29f., 39f., 42, 67, 79, 87, 91, 98, 101, 104, 109, 111, 117, 122, 125f., 130f., 134f., 139, 141, 144, 168, 178, 187f., 227, 230f., 238, 244, 260, 273f., 281f., 286, 291, 296, 307f., 332  
 transubstantiation 275, 277, 279, 284, 289  
 treason 8, 120–122, 134, 265, 271, 275  
 Trojan War 9, 272  
 trolling 41, 43–47, 49f., 53, 55, 58f., 61f.  
 – abusive 16, 24, 45–47, 58, 183, 277, 280, 318  
 – “anonymous” 46, 50, 58  
 – “classical” 45f., 50  
 – “concern trolling” 46  
 – fishing 44  
 – online trolling 43, 45, 58, 62  
 trolls 16, 41, 43–45, 50, 58, 62  
 Tuscany 120, 122, 129, 131f.  
 “Two Swords” debate 295, 300, 308  
  
 vices 125, 138, 283  
 violation of sanctuary (*díguin*) 72–74, 77  
 virago 334  
 virtues 112, 283, 318  
  
 Waldeby, John 285–287  
 William of Rymyngton 277  
 wit 2f., 8, 10, 23f., 33, 37, 41f., 48, 52, 55, 58, 86, 114, 120, 127, 136, 143, 151f., 163, 166, 171, 179, 183, 229, 232f., 237, 257, 323  
 Wycliffe Church 274  
  
 York, archbishops 2–4, 6f., 18f., 23, 28, 30, 42, 44, 46, 54, 66, 76, 89, 97, 100f., 104, 119f., 125, 139, 143–145, 185, 188f., 225f., 229, 232f., 235, 240, 249–254, 259, 264, 266f., 271–279, 281f., 284–287, 289, 294, 301, 314f., 318f., 321, 323–325, 329  
     Scrope, Richard 271  
     Thoresby, John 274, 276f., 286  
 York, city 2–4, 6f., 18f., 23, 28, 30, 42, 44, 46, 54, 66, 76, 89, 97, 100f., 104, 119f., 125, 139, 143–145, 185, 188f., 225f., 229, 232f., 235, 240, 249–254, 259, 264, 266f., 271–279, 281f., 284–287, 289, 294, 301, 314f., 318f., 321, 323–325, 329  
 York Cycle 18, 271, 273, 277f., 284, 286, 289  
 – *Creation and Fall of the Angels* 271  
 – *Last Judgment* 126, 271  
 Yorkshire 170, 271, 274, 277